

New charges of genocide against Hussein over Kurdish “Anfal” campaign

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The show trial of Saddam Hussein took a significant turn last week with the charging of the ousted Iraqi president and six others with genocide and crimes against humanity for their part in the bloody Anfal campaign in the Kurdish north of Iraq in 1988. The decision, which was undoubtedly approved by Washington, is a risky political gamble that could well backfire on the Bush administration as US complicity in the crimes of the Hussein regime in the 1980s comes to light.

This new indictment has nothing to do with bringing justice for the tens of thousands of Kurds who were killed by the Iraqi military towards the end of the protracted Iran-Iraq war. Like the current trial of Hussein for the murder of 148 Shiites from the village of Dujail in 1982, the launching of the Anfal case is driven entirely by the immediate political needs of the Bush administration in Washington and its political stooges in Baghdad.

Just as the Shiite leaders have exploited the Dujail trial to shore up their waning support, so too the Kurdish parties have immediately welcomed the Anfal charges as an opportunity to deflect growing hostility against their autocratic regional regime in the Kurdish north. Resentment erupted recently in the town of Halabja; the scene of the notorious 1988 poison gas attack, which was part of the Anfal campaign and killed more than 5,000 residents. An angry crowd protesting against official corruption and the lack of services ransacked a memorial to the victims on March 15 before being violently dispersed by Kurdish police. At least one protester was killed and others wounded.

As for the Bush administration, it is obviously hoping that a carefully stage-managed and highly publicised “genocide” trial will halt the continuing slide of support at home for the US occupation of Iraq, particularly in the lead up to mid-term elections in November. The Anfal campaign has featured prominently in President Bush’s latest propaganda offensive to justify the illegal invasion of Iraq and to blame the eruption of civil war on the Hussein regime.

The expedient character of the Anfal charges is demonstrated by concerns that Hussein could be executed before the trial even begins. Under Iraqi law, if he is found guilty and given the death penalty in the Dujail case, the sentence must be carried out within 30 days of the exhaustion of any appeal. Having designed the fast track process to ensure a speedy trial and execution, Washington now wants to extend proceedings. Iraqi President Jalal Talibani, who as leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) also hopes to benefit from the case, stepped in last week to announce that all cases would be heard before an execution.

Along with Hussein, those charged include his cousin Ali Hassan al-Majeed who in March 1987 was formally made supreme commander of the Kurdish north and directed the Anfal campaign. Also indicted are Sultan Hashem Ahmed, military commander of the campaign and later defence minister; Saber Abdel Aziz, director of military intelligence; Hussein Rashid al-Tikriti, deputy of operations for the Iraqi forces; Taher Mohammed al-Ani, governor of the northern city of Mosul; and Farhan al-Jubari, head of military intelligence in the north. The charges do not include the Halabja massacre, which will be tried separately, and are

limited to eight military operations in 1988, excluding previous Baathist repression against the Kurdish population.

At the time, the Hussein regime was fighting for its existence in the drawn out and bloody war against Iran. In 1986, the separatist PUK led by Talibani, broke off lengthy negotiations with Baghdad, signed a military and political agreement with Tehran and seized control of significant sections of the Kurdish north along the border with Iran. Baghdad responded in 1988 with the Anfal campaign, a ruthless war of attrition against a hostile Kurdish population. Large areas of the north were declared “protected areas” and the residents ordered to leave. Those that refused were treated as Iranian spies and saboteurs. Estimates of the number killed or “disappeared” range from 50,000 to 180,000.

President Bush is fond of citing the Anfal campaign and accusing Hussein of “gassing his own people,” but the chief international backer of the Baathist regime in the 1980s was the US itself. If Hussein and his lieutenants are to be put on trial for the murder of Kurds then standing alongside them in the dock should be the surviving members of the Reagan administration, including Bush’s own father, who was Reagan’s vice-president, and the present defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who was Reagan’s special envoy to Iraq in 1983-84. Moreover, the secret archives of the CIA, Pentagon and State Department should be opened up to reveal the true extent of Washington’s complicity in all of Hussein’s crimes.

Still reeling from the collapse of the pro-US dictatorship of Shah Reza Pahlavi in 1979, the Reagan administration encouraged Hussein to launch a war on Iran as a means of containing the new Islamic regime in Tehran. When despite initial defeats the Iranian army began to turn the tide on the Iraqi military, Reagan moved to shore up the Baathists. In February 1982, despite objections from Congress, the US administration removed Iraq from the official American list of state sponsors of terrorism and thus the ban on providing financial and military assistance to the Hussein regime.

In his capacity of special envoy, Rumsfeld was pivotal in US negotiations with Hussein that culminated in the resumption of formal diplomatic relations in late 1984. As early as 1983, Washington was aware that Iraqi forces were using chemical weapons against Iranian troops in contravention of international law. As stories of horrific gassings began to emerge in 1984, the US formally “censured” Iraq but at the same time dispatched Rumsfeld to Baghdad to assure Hussein that its support for his war and for the normalisation of diplomatic relations was “undiminished”.

The full story of US support for the Iraqi regime is yet to be told. But there is ample evidence that the Reagan administration provided Hussein with billions of dollars in credits, military intelligence including satellite data on Iranian troop movements and assistance in military planning, as well as giving the green light for US allies in Europe and the Middle East to provide military hardware and aid. American and European firms supplied Iraq with the essential ingredients for the development and manufacture of chemical and biological weapons.

In the lead up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, for instance, a US-sponsored

UN resolution required Baghdad to provide a full accounting of its “weapons of mass destruction”, which by that time had all been dismantled. Iraq responded with an 11,000-page report, then was immediately censored by Washington to remove details of US and European involvement in Iraq’s WMD programs. The German newspaper *Die Tageszeitung* obtained an uncensored copy of the report, which listed 22 prominent American corporations including well-known names such as Bechtel, Dupont, Rockwell and Honeywell, along with many European companies. “From about 1975 onwards, these companies are shown to have supplied entire complexes, building elements, basic materials and technical know-how for Saddam Hussein’s program to develop nuclear, chemical and biological weapons of mass destruction,” the newspaper wrote.

The Reagan administration’s support was political and diplomatic as well as material. In March 1986, as evidence of Iraq’s use of chemical weapons became overwhelming, the US and Britain used their veto to block a motion in the UN Security Council condemning Iraq. Moreover, the US was the only country to vote against a non-binding UN Security Council statement on the same issue. Increasingly, US agencies responded allegations of Iraq’s use of chemical weapons with a conscious campaign of deception and disinformation, claiming that the Iranian military was also using poison gas.

All of these elements combined in the US administration’s response to the Anfal campaign in 1988. Where possible Washington and its allies maintained a studied silence, even though Western intelligence agencies must have been aware of the extent of the destruction taking place, if for no other reason than hundreds of Kurdish villages were vanishing from satellite photographs of the region. In the case of Halabja, however, photographs and other evidence of a massacre were overwhelming and the White House responded with a new campaign of lies. A carefully documented article entitled “Iran’s nuclear posture and the scars of war” published in January 2005 on the *Middle East Report Online* web site by Joost Hiltermann, Middle East director of the Brussels-based International Crisis Group, summed up the US reaction.

“When Iraqi planes gassed Halabja, the embarrassment potential was such that Washington went into disinformation overdrive. It took a week before the rhetorical counter-attack was ready for public display, but it was spectacularly successful. By suggesting deviously and on the basis of the flimsiest evidence that not only Iraq but also Iran had used gas in Halabja, State Department spokesmen lifted the onus off the Iraqis. Declassified cables show that US diplomats were then instructed to propagate this myth and dodge the “What’s the evidence” question with the stock “Sorry, but that’s classified information” response. They found a receptive audience. After all, why should anyone care?... Security Council Resolution 612 (May 3, 1988) condemning the Halabja atrocity came a long two months after the event and cast its disapproval on both governments in equal measure. In the final analysis, the only evidence for the convenient claim that Iran used chemical weapons during the war is that the US government said so. Somehow, this sufficed,” Hiltermann wrote.

A preliminary report by the US Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA), the same body that was collaborating closely with the Iraqi military, invented the myth that Iran was responsible. So pervasive were these lies that a major study of the Anfal campaign by the US-based Human Rights Watch in 1993 wrote: “[T]he illusion has long persisted, fostered initially by reports from the US intelligence community, which ‘tilted’ strongly towards Baghdad during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War, that both sides were responsible for the chemical attack on Halabja. This is false: The testimony of survivors establishes beyond reasonable doubt that Halabja was an Iraqi action, launched in response to a brief capture of the city by Iraqi [Kurdish] *peshmerga* assisted by Iranian Revolutionary Guards. The thousands who died, virtually all of them civilians, were victims of the

Iraqi regime.”

The clearest demonstration of US complicity in the Anfal campaign is the fact that its collaboration—military, economic and political—with the Hussein regime accelerated in the wake of Halabja. In a 2002 article entitled “Who armed Saddam?” British academic Glen Rangawala wrote: “During the Anfal campaign, the US escalated its support for Iraq. It joined in Iraq’s attacks on Iranian facilities, blowing up two Iranian oil rigs and destroying an Iranian frigate a month after the Halabja attack. Within two months, senior US officials were encouraging corporate coordination through an Iraqi state-sponsored forum. The US administration opposed, and eventually blocked, a US Senate bill that cut off loans to Iraq. The US approved exports to Iraq of items with dual civilian and military use at double the rate in the aftermath of Halabja as it did before 1988. Iraqi written guarantees about civilian use were accepted by the US commerce department, which did not request licenses and reviews (as it did for many other countries).”

The US only “discovered” the Anfal atrocities after it became politically useful to do so. Following the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, the US administration headed by President George Bush senior seized the opportunity to implement long-held US ambitions for dominance in the Middle East and turned upon the Iraqi regime. After encouraging Hussein to believe that it would turn a blind eye, Bush senior used the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait as a pretext for its own massive military intervention. It was only in the wake of the first Gulf War in 1991 that Washington began to accuse its erstwhile ally Saddam Hussein of genocide over the Anfal campaign.

In opening up this political can of worms by indicting Hussein over the Anfal campaign, the current Bush administration is relying on its puppet regime in Baghdad to ensure that no sensitive details see the light of day. It is a measure of the venality of all the Iraqi leaders, particularly Iraqi President Talibani and other Kurdish leaders, that they have not a word to say about US support for Hussein’s crimes, including the murderous attacks on their own people. In the case of Talibani, it is simply a continuation of a long history of opportunist manoeuvring that has more than once resulted in a catastrophe for the Kurdish people.

As for the special tribunal that will try the Anfal case, it has been handpicked by US officials and its operations are supervised by a small army of American lawyers based in the US embassy. The methods to be used have already been on full display in the Dujail trial during which the presiding judge has blocked any consideration of the legitimacy of the court or the political context of the case. Any potentially embarrassing comments by Hussein and his co-defendants have been screened out by cutting off live TV coverage of proceedings. When one of Hussein’s defence lawyers held up a photograph of US torture victims in Abu Ghraib last week in a frustrated protest against the legitimacy of the trial, the judge drummed her out of the court and threatened to institute contempt charges.

From the outset, Hussein’s guilt in the Dujail case and the sentence have been predetermined. If the Anfal trial, despite every effort to muzzle Hussein and his lawyers, becomes politically too hot for Washington to handle, his execution may well be carried out sooner rather than later.



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