

Iraqi general “Chemical Ali” condemned to death

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General Ali Hassan al-Majid, one of the late Iraqi president Saddam Hussein’s top associates, was sentenced to death by the Iraqi High Tribunal (IHT) on June 24, after being found guilty of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity as leader of the 1987-88 Anfal campaign against Iraqi Kurds. At the time, his indiscriminate use of poison gas earned him the nickname “Chemical Ali.”

While Ali was certainly guilty of heinous crimes, his sentencing is an exercise in victors’ justice, a clumsy attempt to boost the US occupation’s prestige while covering up criminal behavior by Washington both linked to the Anfal campaign and during the ongoing American occupation of Iraq.

The IHT itself is an illegal outgrowth of the illegitimate US occupation of Iraq. The US-led Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) created it in December 2003 to try genocide and war crimes cases. As Iraqi law did not previously recognize such crimes, this violated the Fourth Geneva Convention, which forbids occupying powers from changing the laws of occupied countries. Its first administrator was Salem Chalabi, the nephew of Iraqi-American exile and convicted bank swindler Ahmed Chalabi. The latter fed the White House lies about alleged Iraqi weapons of mass destruction that were used to justify the US invasion. Significantly, the CPA legally barred the IHT from trying American forces.

Ali’s trial was closely supervised by Washington. According to the *New York Times*, US Justice Department lawyers provided “much of the legal expertise” in the case. US officials also withheld the identity of the judge and prosecutors, ostensibly to protect them from assassination by Iraqi insurgents. Funded largely by the US to the tune of \$150 million, the IHT met in the American Green Zone headquarters in Baghdad, in a building tightly guarded by US troops and overflown by its Predator drones.

Trying to maximize the public relations benefits of Ali’s sentencing, US officials ghoulishly brought in a group of Kurdish politicians to watch the convicted man’s reaction to the announcement of his death sentence. The tactic flopped, according to the *Times*: “Kurds’ phlegmatic reaction at the verdicts contrasted starkly with the jubilant hugging in the gallery with which prominent figures from the new Iraqi ruling class—mostly Shiites and Kurds [...]—greeted the former ruler’s [Hussein’s] death sentence in November [2006].”

Acknowledging in passing the terrible conditions in US-occupied Iraq, the *Times* speculated that one reason for this muted reaction was the “growing inclination of Iraqis ... to say that life was never as miserable as it has become under the daily cycle of suicide bombings and death-squad killings, and the deprivation of basic public services like electricity, hospitals, and schooling.”

In fact, Ali will hang for causing far fewer deaths than the US occupiers of Iraq. In its 1993 denunciation of the Anfal campaign, *Genocide in Iraq*, Human Rights Watch wrote that “hundreds of thousands have fled into exile; tens of thousands more have been killed” in the operation. Johns Hopkins University’s public health study published in the *Lancet* more than a year and a half ago estimated that the US occupation had already been responsible for 655,000 Iraqi deaths. Since the 2003 invasion, 1.2 million Iraqi refugees have arrived in Syria alone, and 1.9 million Iraqis have been “internally displaced,” that is to say, exiled in their own country.

More detailed allegations of Ali’s anti-Kurd atrocities also find parallels in the 2004 operations by the American military against Fallujah. “Gendercide”—that is, deliberate and exclusive targeting of fighting-age males—also occurred in Fallujah, a city of 250,000 where males aged 15 to 55 were not allowed to leave before US forces bombed the city and then fought through it, shooting anything that moved. Ali’s shocking use of poison gas

against thousands of Iraqi Kurds was echoed in Fallujah by US forces' widespread use of white phosphorus—a substance that burns flesh on impact, charring bodies but leaving clothes intact.

Ali's trial not only covered up the fact that the atrocities over which he presided have been outstripped by those of the US invaders. By narrowly focusing on orders issued by Ali to field commanders in northern Iraq, the trial sidestepped the issue of American and international support for Iraq during the Anfal campaign.

Saywan Barzani, nephew of Iraqi Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani, commented: "In [Iraq] there are another 223 people who over the next two or three years will be tried for the same crime, [and] there are those in various other countries who are responsible for politically and financially supporting Saddam's regime, for supplying him with weapons. Hanging all the defendants in these trials will not reveal the names of all these accomplices."

The attacks on Iraqi Kurds by Hussein and Ali took place as part of the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War. The Reagan administration viewed these crimes with approval, as a necessary tactic in the struggle to realize the goal that drives US policy: control of the Persian Gulf and its oil.

American policy during the nearly decade-long war aimed at bloodying the Iranian regime brought to power by the 1979 revolution and preventing Iran or Iraq from gaining enough influence to contest US military and political control of the region. Washington therefore tacitly encouraged Hussein to invade Iran in 1980 and then negotiated aid to both Iraq and Iran—with then-Vice President George H.W. Bush arranging billions of dollars in "agricultural credits" for Iraq, and CIA figures around Lt. Col. Oliver North shipping weapons to Iran, leading to the Iran-Contra scandal.

By 1987, Iran was on the offensive, having sealed off Iraq's access to the Persian Gulf by capturing the Fao peninsula. Iraqi attempts to destroy the Iranian economy by launching missile attacks on ships exporting Iranian oil had backfired, as Iran retaliated by targeting ships exporting Iraqi oil through Kuwait. In northern Iraq, where Iraq's Kurdish population lives, Iranian forces had fought to within 100 miles of Iraq's key oilfields at Kirkuk. At this point, Iraqi Kurdish separatist fighters in the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) began cooperating with Iranian forces.

In March 1987 Hussein ordered Ali to use all means to destroy the Kurdish guerrillas. In a strategy recalling the US "strategic hamlet" program in Vietnam, Iraqi Kurds

were to be herded into camps and Kurds found in restricted areas outside the camps were to be killed on sight. At the same time, the US threw its weight behind Iraq, sending its warships to escort Kuwaiti tankers and protect them from Iranian attacks. By August 1987, an American fleet including a battleship and an aircraft carrier was escorting Kuwaiti tankers in the Persian Gulf.

Hussein's most-often cited atrocity against Iraq's Kurds—the gassing of the village of Halabja, with a reported death toll of about 5,000—took place on March 16-17, 1988. Iranian journalists were rushed to the area by their government and published photographs of Iraqi civilians lying dead on the streets of Halabja. Iran released these pictures to the world. The *New York Times* carried an article by Alan Cowell on May 24, 1988 ("Iran charges Iraq with gas attack"), which noted that Iran was accusing Iraq of using poison gas "on the northern battle front."

The US responded by deepening its support for Hussein. American government sources spread rumors that the Halabja gas attack had actually been carried out by Iran. In April 1988 the US launched Operation Preying Mantis, a series of attacks on Iranian oil installations and warships that damaged two major Iranian oil rigs and sank two Iranian destroyers and several gunboats—roughly half of the country's navy. With one final atrocity—the downing of an Iranian passenger jet by the USS *Vincennes* in July 1988—the US Navy convinced Iran to capitulate and agree to a UN resolution ending the war.

In short, Ali's genocidal crimes against his own people were not considered a matter of concern by the US government when they occurred, and the American occupation has since repeated them on a far larger scale.

Ali's execution, far from representing a new stage of justice and accountability in Iraq, is another criminal political fraud perpetrated by the Bush administration on the Iraqi, US and world population.



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