

Another political show trial in Baghdad: Tariq Aziz charged with genocide

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3 May 2008

The trial that began this week of Tariq Aziz on the charge of genocide is a particularly vindictive act on the part of the Bush administration and its puppet government in Iraq. The court is trying him and seven other former Iraqi government leaders for the 1992 execution of 42 businessmen accused of price-fixing. If found guilty, Aziz faces the death penalty.

After Hussein himself, Aziz was arguably the regime's best known face around the world. Highly educated and fluent in English, he was a key public spokesman and diplomat for the Baathist regime. He served as Iraq's foreign minister from 1983 until 1991 and as deputy prime minister from 1991 until the 2003 US invasion. In the lead-up to the war, he frequently appeared in the international media, articulately denying the US lies that the Iraqi government possessed weapons of mass destruction and had links with Al Qaeda. He accused the Bush administration of wanting war for "oil and Israel". He surrendered to US forces on April 24, 2003.

The Iraqi Special Tribunal—a kangaroo court established by the US occupation to judicially murder Saddam Hussein and other leading Baathists—only announced that Aziz was being prosecuted on April 24. For the past five years, he has been imprisoned without charges by the American military. He is currently being held at Camp Cropper near Baghdad airport. His only public appearance since 2003 has been the testimony he gave during the trial of Saddam Hussein on behalf of several of the defendants. Appeals for his release by his children and by the head of the Iraqi Christian Church, to which Aziz belongs, have been ignored.

During the trial of Saddam Hussein and other Iraqi officials, the WSWs commented that the US occupation of Iraq and its local collaborators have no credibility to try anyone for crimes against the Iraqi people. The Bush administration is responsible for a scale of killing and criminality that far exceeds those of Hussein's Baathist regime. The 2003 invasion was an illegal war of aggression that has so far cost an estimated 1.2 million Iraqis lives, turned four million into refugees and devastated the country's economic and social infrastructure. In the past few

weeks, American bombs and bullets have slaughtered or maimed well over 3,000 people in the streets of Baghdad's Sadr City.

Amid this ongoing carnage, the charge of "genocide" levelled against Aziz is an outrage. By all accounts, the 1992 killing of the merchants was ordered solely by Hussein. The only basis on which Aziz is being prosecuted is that he was a member of the Revolutionary Command Council in whose name the executions were carried out. His son Ziad, who lives in exile in Jordan, told the BBC: "Everybody knows that he was not involved in this thing, but the Iraqi government has accused him because of his name, because he is Tariq Aziz. Even though he was part of the regime, everybody knows my father was responsible for foreign relations... he was not involved in this thing about the merchants."

The state of Aziz's health makes his prosecution on trumped-up charges even more outrageous. The 72-year-old man is dying of lung cancer and has reportedly suffered several strokes in recent years. He hobbled into court on Tuesday on a walking stick, looking sick, gaunt and tired. He had no legal representation as his lawyer has fled the country out of fear of being murdered by death squads linked to the Shiite parties that dominate the Iraqi government. The proceedings will resume on May 20.

Six of the men who face trial alongside Aziz include: former interior minister Watban Ibrahim al-Hassan; former director of public security Sabaawi Ibrahim al-Hassan; former finance minister Ahmad Hussein Khudier; former presidential secretary Abdul Hamid Mahmoud; former Baghdad governor Issam Rashid Houweish; and Mezban Khedr Hadi, who, like Aziz, was a member of Revolutionary Command Council.

To undermine any public sympathy for the accused, the Iraqi Special Tribunal is also cynically prosecuting Ali Hassan al-Majid for the execution of the merchants as well. Ali Hassan al-Majid is better known as "Chemical Ali" and was one of the most hated figures in the Baath regime after Hussein and his sons. He was sentenced to death last year

for his role in the gassing of thousands of Iraqi Kurds during the 1980s.

Under Iraqi law, the death penalty must be carried out within 30 days. In Majid's case, however, the execution has been repeatedly delayed. The May 1 editorial of the English language *Arab News* observed: "Chemical Ali has been kept alive, purely to answer these serious but albeit lesser charges, perhaps because the Americans believe that Aziz's name will be blackened by association with one of the undoubted ogres of Saddam's regime".

The prosecution of Tariq Aziz has nothing to do with justice for the victims of Baathism. At one level, the decision to try a dying man is a case of sadistic revenge. Aziz was very much the public face of the Baathist regime who challenged the lies by the US used to justify its invasions of Iraq in 1991 and 2003. Moreover, despite intense pressure to do so, he refused in 2006 to testify against the former dictator. Instead, Aziz appeared on behalf of several of Hussein's co-accused, giving evidence that they had no role in the 1982 execution of 130 Shiite men and boys—the crime for which Hussein was hung.

However, the primary motive for the Bush administration to charge Aziz is to ensure that his intimate knowledge of US crimes in the region goes with him to his grave. Aziz was central in the diplomatic relations between the US government and the Iraqi regime during the Iran-Iraq war from 1980 to 1988—a conflict that claimed over one million lives and saw the use by Iraq of chemical and biological weapons on the battlefield and against civilian populations.

Hussein ordered his military to invade Iran in September 1980 following the ousting of Shah in 1979. From the outset, Iraq was given financial and military assistance by US allies in the Middle East such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Kuwait, who were terrified that revolutionary upheaval in Iran would produce social unrest in their own countries, particularly among Shiites.

By 1982, with Iraqi forces forced into retreat, the US was providing its own extensive assistance to Hussein in order to try to ensure that Iraq was not defeated. Until the end of the conflict, the US funnelled billions of dollars and considerable military equipment to Iraq. In the latter stages, the US military also supplied intelligence to the Iraqi military.

Tariq Aziz could shed light on all of Iraq's dealings with the Reagan and first Bush administrations. In particular, he would be able to detail the extent of American government involvement in the assistance given by some 150 US, European and other foreign companies to Iraq's chemical and biological warfare programs. American firms, for example, are alleged to have supplied Iraq with material that could be used in the manufacture of anthrax and other

agents, as well as the missile technology to unleash them.

Pat Lang, a Defense Intelligence Agency official in the 1980s, told the *New York Times* in 2002 that "the use of gas on the battlefield by the Iraqis was not a matter of deep strategic concern" to the US. Donald Rumsfeld, then special envoy to the Middle East for the Reagan administration, in fact met with Tariq Aziz in Baghdad on the same day in 1984 that the United Nations first indicted Iraq for its use of chemical weapons. Rumsfeld's main interest was in ultimately failed negotiations for the construction of an oil pipeline from Iraq to Jordan by US transnational Bechtel. (See: "Bechtel awarded Iraq contract: War profits and the US 'military-industrial complex'")

US aid to Iraq continued to flow after evidence emerged of the 1988 gassing of Kurdish civilians. The backing of the Reagan White House for Hussein saw it overrule a Senate motion imposing sanctions.

After the conclusion of the Iran-Iraq war, the US turned on its former proxy, using the 1990 invasion of Kuwait as the pretext, as a means of establishing a permanent US military presence in the Middle East. Aziz would have been privy to the discussions with US ambassador to Iraq, April Glaspie, in which she effectively gave Hussein the green light to invade Kuwait. He would have detailed knowledge of the circumstances in which, at the end of the war, the first Bush administration encouraged Shiite and Kurdish rebellions, then turned a blind eye as the Baathist regime savagely crushed the opposition.

A report in the British *Times* on March 21 that Tariq Aziz has been writing his memoirs may have a great deal to do with why he has been charged. After the virtually inevitable guilty verdict, he will remain in prison until his death—either by hanging or cancer. Either way, his conviction will ensure that he is never questioned in a court or able to speak publicly about Washington's crimes in the Middle East.



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