

Put Chemical Ali on trial in Halabja

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In 1991, Kurds living in the north of Iraqi Kurdistan, including the town of Halabja poured onto the streets calling for “the snake – Chemical Ali” to be hanged. In the early 1980s, Saddam had given his cousin, [Ali Hassan al-Majid](#) [1] full authority to suppress the Kurds in the north of Iraq who were fighting for their rights. He enthusiastically responded by employing a variety of state-of-the-art weapons of that time, culminating in the most deadly – a ‘cocktail’ of mustard gas and [nerve agents](#) [2].

To overcome the Kurdish *peshmerga* and cut them off from the strong local support they were receiving, he launched a widespread [campaign](#) [3] of mass extermination and disappearances. This began by rounding up 182,000 Kurds in trucks, whose bodies have subsequently turned up in almost every corner of Iraqi Kurdistan. Then he began burning and levelling their villages.

This course of action continued unimpeded for years. In an audio tape confiscated in the 1991 Kurdish uprising in the city of Kirkuk, Chemical Ali bragged: “We use chemical gas against them, but who is going to say anything? International community! B***** the international community!” His sadism combined with the international community’s indifference created fertile ground for the more extensive use of chemical gas in 1988 in the Kurdish town of Halabja. This time, 5,000 civilians were killed within a few hours, while their survivors have suffered from a range of chronic diseases including asthma, skin diseases, miscarriages, congenital malformation of babies, and eye damage.

The only punishment Ali Hassan received at the hands of the international community was the nickname of “Chemical Ali”. In 1990, his mission in the north had ended and he headed southwards. Thousands of *Shi’a* Arabs who had almost overthrown Saddam’s regime in the 1991 uprising, were herded by Chemical Ali into the deserts of Iraq and buried alive. The man was, by the way, universally hated throughout Iraq, and even within Saddam’s own family circle. [Raghad](#) [4], Saddam’s daughter called down God’s curses on him; she alleged in an interview with the al-Arabia TV channel that “It was Ali Hassan who was behind all of the crimes, dragging my father into notoriety” and referred to the considerable blood he had spilt even beyond the borders of Iraq, when he became the governor of Kuwait in 1990.

For a long time the reaction of the international community, especially to the trauma of [Halabja](#) [4], was muted in deference to a regime which was proving itself useful by fighting the neighbouring country of Iran. Iraqi Kurds tried every means they could without let-up to expose the scale of devastation of the chemical gas attack to the outside world.

But reaction was slow, and different excuses emerged echoing remaining doubts about the use of chemical gas or alternatively doubts over who had used it, Iranian or Iraqi perpetrators. Where I come from, we are convinced to this day that these are all feeble excuses enabling the big international and human rights organisations of the world to avoid their responsibilities for seeing that justice is done.

Memory and justice

Fast forward fifteen years and there is no more interest in the true nature of Saddam's regime, but all of a sudden the United States and Britain begin to talk up Chemical Ali and his actions, to bolster their case for regime change in Iraq.

In the early days of the war, British forces were credited with killing Chemical Ali [5] in the city of Basra, but he had in fact survived the intensive battle in the southern zone and rushed back to safety in Baghdad where he is known to have spent 7 and 8 April with the Minister of Defense while the latter was undergoing treatment for an injury in Baghdad's [5] medical city.

The search for Saddam's top Ba'ath party members led to the capture of Chemical Ali only on 21 August. News of his capture brought happiness and relief flooding into the hearts of every Iraqi within and outside the country. In the Kurdish [5] cities, people poured again onto the streets, this time singing songs, and shooting in the air for a whole day and night. But his capture does not mean the end of Iraqi grievances against him. What are the Americans now going to do with him and the others captured from the list of 55 wanted men?

Will those same human rights organisations who failed to speak up before now say that Chemical Ali has the right to defend himself away from the public eye, even that he should be given time – perhaps years – to answer questions, or mercy because of his failing health?

Residents from the town of Halabja who remain the living symbol of Chemical Ali's ruthlessness have no such compunction. They have always wanted to get their hands on him and take their revenge. So perhaps turning Halabja into an international court to try Chemical Ali is the most fitting remedy. In no other court in the world would you find more truthful witnesses able and willing to stand against him bearing the strongest physical evidence of what they allege against him.

This week, a steel monument commemorating the chemical bombardment of the town in 1988, has been finished and erected in the outskirts of Halabja [6]. The huge structure consists of six halls: a registry of the names of those killed; a hall of the martyrs; a full-size diorama featuring lifelike replicas of residents found dead on the town's streets.

Apart from films and pictures of the effects of the chemical attack, the people of Halabja are themselves ready and willing to bear witness to the atrocity pointing to the names of 5,000 of their loved ones, to the multiple graves, to all the womenfolk who can no longer have babies.

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[3] <http://www.hrw.org/reports/1993/iraqanfal/> target=_blank

[4] <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/08/02/1059480587521.html> target=_blank

[5] <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/04/07/1049567622412.html> target=_blank

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