

The Indelible Smell of Apples: Poison Gas Survivors in Halabja, Kurdistan-Iraq, and Their Struggle for Recognition

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Abstract On March 16, 1988 the Iraqi Army of Saddam Hussein's Baath regime attacked the Kurdish town of Halabja with poison gas, killing an estimated 5,000 people within a few minutes. In today's autonomous region of Kurdistan-Iraq, the "martyrs' town of Halabja" has become a symbol for the suffering of Iraqi Kurdish people under the Baath regime and a key element of Kurdish national identity. At the same time, the people of Halabja continue to suffer from the long-term psychological, health, and environmental consequences of the poison gas attack. The present account is based on the author's longstanding research and practical work among survivors of violence in Kurdistan-Iraq. It outlines the background and impact of the chemical attack on Halabja and provides an insight into the survivors' situation—from the immediate aftermath of the attack to this day; it details the constant struggle of the victims with the long-term psychological effects of the attack as well as their struggle for justice and recognition of their experience.

1 Introduction: The Indelible Smell of Apples

In 1987 and 1988, the Iraqi Baath regime under Saddam Hussein used chemical weapons against the Kurdish population in Iraq. On March 16, 1988 the Iraqi Army attacked the Kurdish town of Halabja by poison gas and killed an estimated number of 5,000 people in a few minutes.¹ Before and after the attack on Halabja, poison

¹No accurate body count could be made at the time. The casualty figures are based on the testimonies of survivors, Kurdish *peshmerga* and Iranian soldiers, Iranian medical personnel, and journalists present in the immediate aftermath of the attack, (Hiltermann 2008). Human Rights Watch researcher Shorsh Resool collected 3,200 individual names of victims in interviews with survivors, Human Rights Watch (1993, 108). Kurdish and Iranian estimates ranged between 4,000 and 7,000 victims at the time (ibid.). Today, the figure of 5,000 victims is commonly used by Iraqi Kurdish sources and in the national Kurdish discourse and referred to in official memorial ceremonies and monuments such as the Central Halabja Monument.

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gas was used in various other towns and villages during the so called Anfal Campaign of the Iraqi military against the Kurdish rural population in the border regions with Iran and Turkey, in the course of which thousands of villages were destroyed and some 100,000 people deported and killed. The Anfal Campaign is much less known to the outside world than the poison gas attack on Halabja.

The smell of apples is deeply imprinted into the memory of the survivors of poison gas attacks in Kurdistan-Iraq. All of them describe the intense smell of apples—or more precisely: the sweet smell of rotten apples that spread all over the place once the lethal poison-gas bombs touched the ground.

Visitors of today's Kurdistan-Iraq stumble over references to the apple as a memory symbol on many occasions. Apples decorated with cloves were traditionally used as a symbol of love and friendship in Kurdish communities; today, there is an additional tragic meaning to the symbol: the association with the lethal scent of chemical weapons. Visitors to the Ministry of Martyrs and Anfal Affairs in Erbil are given an apple studded with cloves with the inscription “a message of love and peace” as a gift. In the film “1001 Apples” by the late Kurdish director Taha Karimi (2013), survivors of the Anfal Campaign distribute apples to be decorated in remembrance of the victims. In the Zamwa Art Gallery in Sulaimania, a rocket shell with green apples gushing out of it like a waterfall symbolizes the Halabja attack. And at the 2015 ceremony for the victims of the chemical attack on Halabja at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, organized by Kurdish exile groups, young Kurdish women walked through the crowd of participants spraying air freshener with the scent of green apples to evoke the horror of the chemical weapons used.

2 Background

The Kurds often define themselves as the world's largest nation without a state. Indeed, after World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, their hopes for a Kurdish state were dashed and 30 million Kurds were scattered across five different nation states: Turkey, Syria, Iran, the former Soviet Union, and Iraq. Today, some 6 million Kurds live in Iraq alone and make up some 20% of Iraq's population. They inhabit a strategically important region of Iraq, rich in oil reserves and bordering on Iran and Turkey. There has been a conflict between the Kurds and the various Iraqi central governments at least since 1923.² The conflict with and the persecution of the Kurds intensified with the Baath Party's rise to power in 1968 and escalated when Saddam Hussein became president of Iraq in 1979. Saddam Hussein's regime spread a meticulous net of control, violence, and terror all over the Iraqi society, targeting Shia and Marsh Arab communities in the South, Kurds in the North and

²For the history of the Kurds in Iraq see McDowall (2004); van Bruinessen (1989).

political opponents of all ethnic and religious affiliations.³ The Kurdish population in Iraq saw multiple waves of violence and persecution since the mid-1970s: Kurdish villages in border regions were evacuated and the population forcibly resettled; Kurds were expelled from oil-rich cities like Kirkuk and the regions repopulated by Arabs instead. Up to 1981 alone, 700,000 people had been forcibly displaced and relocated within the Kurdish areas (Vanly 1986, 163).

In 1980 Saddam Hussein led Iraq into a war with Iran that lasted eight years and left both countries devastated, with more than one million soldiers dead on both sides. Kurdish guerrilla fighters—the so-called *peshmerga*⁴—made use of the war situation, intensified their attacks against the Baath regime and entered into an alliance with Iran. The reprisals by the Baath regime reached genocidal proportions. In 1984, 8,000 men from the Kurdish Barzani tribe, the backbone of the Kurdish autonomy struggle during the 1960s and 1970s, were deported and killed—a prelude to the forthcoming episodes of mass killings in 1988 (Human Rights Watch 1993, 39–41). At the very end of the Iran-Iraq war, Saddam Hussein’s regime threw its overblown military apparatus against the internal enemy: the Kurds.

3 The Anfal Campaign and the Poison Gas Attack Against Halabja in 1988⁵

In 1987 Saddam Hussein’s cousin, General Ali Hassan al-Majid, was appointed General Secretary of the so called “High Office for Issues of the North” and assigned full military responsibility to—in al-Majid own words—“solve the Kurdish problem and slaughter the saboteurs” (Human Rights Watch 1993, 351). Al-Majid was the architect and commander of the so-called Anfal Campaign in 1988. Anfal is the title of the 8th sura of the Quran and served as a code word for a vast military operation against Kurdish rural areas where resistance fighters were active. The Anfal Campaign was planned long beforehand, openly announced, justified as punishment for the Kurds’ cooperation with Iran, and meticulously documented by the regime. From February to September 1988 thousands of villages were razed to the ground. The population was rounded up; men between 15 and 60 and young women were separated from their families and deported to unknown destinations. For more than 15 years after Anfal, their fate remained unknown; the discovery of more than 300 mass graves after the fall of the Baath regime proved that these people fell victim to mass executions. Kurdish sources estimate the

³For a comprehensive analysis of the Baath regime’s policy and repressive structure, see Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett (1987); Al-Khalil (1989).

⁴Literally translated, the Kurdish term means “those who face death” and is used for Kurdish rebels and fighters, independently from their various party affiliations.

⁵A comprehensive documentation and analysis of the chemical attack against Halabja has been provided by Hiltermann (2007).

number of Anfal victims at 182,000.⁶ As only a small number of the mass graves has been investigated, the individual fates of most of the victims are uncertain to this day.⁷

Elderly people and women with children were deported to detention camps and held there for months—many of them, especially children and the elderly, died. Those who survived were released in late autumn 1988 under what the regime called an “Amnesty” and forcibly resettled to so-called collective towns, where they continued to live under the control of the Iraqi Army (Human Rights Watch 1993, 306–311; Mlodoch 2014, 237–246).

In the course of the Anfal Campaign, the Baath regime used chemical weapons in dozens of locations (Human Rights Watch 1993, 22; Hiltermann 2007, 130); their use proved effective in making villagers flee in panic so that Iraqi soldiers could easily channel them towards concentration points, whence they were deported to be killed or detained (Hiltermann 2007, 130, 135).

Shortly after the beginning of the Anfal Campaign, on March 16, 1988, the Iraqi air force attacked Halabja, a Kurdish town of some 70,000 inhabitants located in the immediate proximity of the border with Iran, a reprisal for alleged joint cross-border operations of Iranian forces and Kurdish *peshmerga*. The town came under Iraqi attack days before by conventional weapons; therefore many of its inhabitants hid in provisional hand-dug underground air-raid shelters, basements or caves. These hideouts became deadly traps when the Iraqi Army threw tons of chemical agents on the town in the early evening of March 16.

The chemical attack lasted some 45 min. Survivors describe white-yellowish clouds that sank to the ground.⁸ They describe the smell of apples⁹—some say it was rather a smell of garlic or banana, the sense of burning in eyes and on the skin, the inability to breathe.

An estimated 5,000 men, women, and children died a terrible death in Halabja. Many died immediately in the shelters or their houses; thousands ran out in panic to the streets and died there. Others tried to flee the town, but died minutes or hours later after “burning and blistering” and “coughing green vomit” (Human Rights

⁶This figure is based on the number of villages destroyed during the Anfal Campaign and the average village population and is generally used by Anfal survivors, Kurdish politicians, and local academics. Human Rights Watch estimates the number of victims as at least 50,000 and “possibly twice that number” (Human Rights Watch 1993, 20) after evaluating survivors’ testimonies and the Baath regime’s own documents regarding the Anfal Campaign. The responsible military commander of the Iraqi regime, Ali Hassan al-Majid, is reported as having confirmed “not more than 100,000 victims” (*ibid.*, 345).

⁷Background, preparations and course of the Anfal Campaign have been meticulously documented by Human Rights Watch (1993; 1994) based on survivors’ testimonies and the Baath-regime’s own documents. For the long-term impact of Anfal on the survivors see Mlodoch (2014).

⁸1988: Thousands Die in Halabja Gas Attack. *BBC News*, March 16, 1988. http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/march/16/newsid_4304000/4304853.stm. Accessed October 30, 2015.

⁹Halabja: Survivors Talk About Horror of Attack, Continuing Ordeal. *ekurd daily*, March 15, 2008. <http://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2008/3/independentstate2078.htm>. Accessed March 10, 2016.

Watch 1991). Survivors report victims hysterically laughing moments before their death (*ibid.*). Some 7,000 were severely injured—their eyes and skin burned.

Due to the presence of Iranian and Turkish journalists at the time, photos of the victims have gone around the world, giving stirring evidence of the destructive effects of chemical weapons: scores of corpses of men, women, and children in unnatural positions spread all over the streets of Halabja; dreadfully distorted faces of children captured at the moment of death; disoriented survivors, wandering among the corpses, crying out for their loved ones; images of injured survivors with burned eyes and skin peeling off from their faces, arms, and legs in big pieces.¹⁰ These photos have been important as evidence, but are unbearable to look at both for the horror they document and for the viewer's sense of violation of intimacy of the victims at the moment of their agonizing death. One photo among the many has become especially well known: that of Omeri Khawer who throws himself upon his baby child in a desperate attempt to protect him at the moment of death. The image has become an icon in Kurdistan-Iraq; the scene has been reproduced as a diorama in the Halabja Central Memorial and in a statue erected in the centre of Halabja.¹¹

Eyewitnesses who clearly identified Iraqi airplanes as the ones that dropped the chemical bombs and the Baath regime's own documents which were later evaluated by Human Rights Watch give evidence about the responsibility of the Baath regime (Human Rights Watch 1993; Hiltermann 2007). The commander of the poison gas attack against Halabja was once again Iraqi General Ali Hassan al-Majid. Ever since, Iraqi Kurds refer to him as "Chemical Ali."

The injuries of the victims, the testimonies and symptoms of the survivors of the Halabja attack as well as specimen of unexploded bombs analyzed in the immediate aftermath prove the use of highly concentrated mustard gas,¹² combined with at least one nerve agent, probably sarin (Hiltermann 2007, 199).¹³

¹⁰For some of the photos see the website of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, <http://www.kdp.se/halabja.html>. Accessed March 10, 2016.

¹¹The original photo was taken by the Turkish photographer Ramazan Öztürk in the immediate aftermath of the chemical attack in 1988. For the original photo and its reproduction as a statue, see: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/halabja-monument-opens-in-the-hague.aspx?pageID=238&nID=65792&NewsCatID=359>. Accessed March 10, 2016. For the diorama at the Halabja Monument, see photo by Adam Jones: www.flickr.com/photos/adam_jones/5640509079/in/photostream and www.hurriyetdailynews.com/halabja-monument-opens-in-the-hague.aspx?pageID=238&nID=65792&NewsCatID=359. Accessed March 10, 2016.

¹²See also the interview with the Austrian physician Dr. Freilinger who treated Halabja survivors in 1988: Kurdistan Regional Government Representation Austria. Halabja: Interview with Dr. Freilinger. *KRG AT Media*, March 14, 2014. <http://www.gov.krd/a/d.aspx?l=12&a=51117>. Accessed October 30, 2015.

¹³At the time Iraq possessed sarin, tabun, and VX (United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission 2006). However, as there were no medical or forensic investigations in the immediate aftermath of the Halabja attack, the process of finding evidence on the exact substances used in Halabja has proven difficult and controversial. See: Elisabeth Rosenthal. In Iraq Chemical Arms Trial, Scientists Face Many Burdens of Proof. *New York Times*, June, 19, 2006. http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/19/world/europe/19iht-chem.2001719.html?_r=0&pagewanted=all.

At the time, there was no immediate international response to the poison gas attack on Halabja. The U.S. and West European governments then still stood firmly behind Saddam Hussein in his war against the Iranian Islamic Republic, which was regarded as the greatest danger for the West at the time. The international community remained silent.

Thus, the Anfal Campaign and the use of poison gas had fulfilled the Baath regime's aims: the Kurdish resistance was defeated, the Kurdish population frozen in shock and disbelief at the scale of the terror they had experienced and paralyzed by the prospect of seeing another poison gas attack. The Kurds felt forgotten by the world.

4 The Situation of Survivors of the Poison Gas Attacks

4.1 *Haunting Memories, Enduring Grief*

Survivors of the poison gas attack on Halabja have all gone through highly traumatic experiences. Their homes, their families, their social structures, their entire world was destroyed in a few minutes. They witnessed their children, partners, parents, siblings dying a terrible death right in front of them, while being themselves injured, immobilized, struggling with death and thus unable to help them. Many struggle with feelings of guilt for not having been able to protect their children or for not having been able to attend to their relatives during their last moments and adequately mourn their death thereafter. Their concepts of themselves and the world were deeply shattered.

Kamaran Haider was 11 years old then and survived hidden in a makeshift shelter. He stayed there for many hours. When he left the shelter, he found his father, mother, and siblings lying dead on the stairs. "I lost my feeling, all my feeling," he recounts. "I knew that my mum died. I knew that my brother died [...]. At that time, I didn't cry [...]. I didn't feel anything. No happiness, no stress. Well, I knew that people around me died, that's it."¹⁴

Iranian soldiers and the Iranian Red Crescent took hundreds of survivors to Iran for medical treatment after the attack. There was an indescribable chaos, panic, and fear of more attacks to come and of the gas that was still lingering around. Injured and uninjured alike were hectically loaded on trucks and brought outside the town and into Iran. Many survivors lost track of their family members.

(Footnote 13 continued)

Accessed March 10, 2016. Hiltermann (2007, 183–205) gives a detailed account on the controversial process of fixing the evidence.

¹⁴Alfred Joyner. Kurdish Genocide in Iraq: Survivors Tell Their Stories. *International Business Times*, January 18, 2013. <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/kurdish-genocide-in-iraq-survivors-tell-their-stories-2028>. Accessed March 10, 2016.

Many of the severely injured survivors spent years in Iran going from one hospital to another for medical treatment. Others were taken abroad for treatment—to Austria, Germany, and other countries, unaware of what happened to their relatives. A number of children, babies at the time, could not be identified by Iranian authorities and were adopted and brought up by Iranian families. In 2011, the heartbreaking story of Ali Pour was covered by Kurdish and international media and a documentary film (Hidou 2011).¹⁵ Ali grew up as the son of an affectionate Iranian family. At the age of 21 he learned that he was originally a baby survivor of the poison gas attack in Halabja. He went back to Halabja in search of his original family. Three families claimed and hoped for Ali to be their lost son. The evidence provided by a genetic test led to an outbreak of joy in one family and to a new emotional breakdown in two others. Ali, whose original name is Zimnako Mohammed Salih, went the Halabja graveyard and erased his name he found engraved on one of the tombstones.¹⁶

To this day memories and images of the attack are deeply impressed upon the survivors' minds and thoughts. They suffer from what can be clearly defined as traumatic symptoms: nightmares, anxiety, restlessness, depression, panic attacks, flash-backs. Ako Sirini's documentary film "There is Hope Behind the Tears" (2013), based on testimonies of survivors, shows the intensity and presence of pain and grief in survivors twenty five years after the event. The young man, a child of maybe ten years in 1988, was taken to Iran with his siblings after the attack and spent weeks hoping and waiting for his parents to join them. He describes the moment of reunion with his uncle who brought certainty that his parents were dead: "Imagine at that young age, I did not cry because of the presence of the other children. From the day I received that news, I behaved differently. To this day, I haven't cried as much as my heart ached for them" (Sirini 2013, 10:46–11:11). A woman in her seventies stated: "When I think, every moment is like death for me. This pain is not like a soul; once it leaves, it never comes back. The pain lies within you forever" (Sirini 2013, 17:38–17:49).

4.2 *Survivors' Life Conditions Between 1988 and 2003*

We know from psychological trauma research that for victims of extreme violence and trauma the ability to recover and reconstruct their lives largely depends on the life conditions they find themselves in after the traumatic experience.¹⁷ Safety,

¹⁵See also: Halabja Gas Attack Survivor Reunited With Mother. *BBC News Online*, December 5, 2009. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8397547.stm>. Accessed March 10, 2016.

¹⁶Other similar cases have been covered by both Kurdish and international media, see e.g.: Osamah Golpy. Halabja Child To Be Reunited With Family 3 Decades Later. *Rudaw*, August 18, 2015. <http://rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/180820154>. Accessed March 9, 2015.

¹⁷Psychoanalyst Hans Keilson was the first to draw attention to the significance of post-trauma life conditions for coping with traumatic episodes in his post-war studies of child Holocaust survivors in the Netherlands. He developed the concept of sequential traumatization (Keilson 1979).

economic and political stability, social support, societal and political recognition of their experience, and punishment or at least accountability of the perpetrators help victims of extreme violence to recover and find a balance between the past and the present. On the other hand, ongoing conflict and violence, poverty, impunity of the perpetrators, and a lack of assistance prolong and aggravate their suffering and keep them frozen in the moment of their trauma.¹⁸

The life conditions of the Halabja survivors in the years following the attack were more than adverse to any kind of recovery. First of all, many survivors died in subsequent years from their injuries.¹⁹ Numerous others suffered from the long-term impact of the poison gas, from skin and eye diseases, damage to the respiratory and neural systems, and various forms of cancer, infertility, miscarriages and congenital disorders. Even in the third generation, the rate of leukemia is high among children (Gosden et al. 2001). The soil in and around Halabja will remain contaminated for a long time to come (Ala'Aldeen 2005).

Immediately after the attack, the Baath regime had razed the town of Halabja to the ground; there was no possibility of return. Many survivors stayed in Iran; others continued to hide in the mountains. The majority of survivors were forcibly resettled by the Baath regime in a so called *mujamma* (collective town) cynically named “New Halabja” at a distance of some 70 km from the destroyed town. Like other urban settlements built for Anfal survivors, “New Halabja” was a camp-like structure with housing, schools, and medical facilities. Its population lived under military control and was forbidden to leave and, especially, to set foot in Halabja.²⁰

In 1991 a U.S.-led military coalition attacked Iraq in reaction to the latter's invasion of Kuwait. The Kurds in Iraq—seeing finally a chance to defeat the dictator—followed the U.S. call to arms, but were let down and abandoned by the coalition after its armistice with Iraq. The Kurdish insurrection was subsequently brutally crushed by Iraqi forces. At the moment of defeat, two million Kurds fled in utmost panic to Iran and Turkey, leaving behind all their belongings. The images of their mass exodus went around the world in the Spring of 1991. The panic among the fleeing Kurds could only be explained by their fear of further poison gas attacks that had been deeply imprinted into the minds of the Kurdish people in 1988.

¹⁸The author refers to a socially and contextualized concept of trauma as developed in the work with Holocaust survivors, victims of torture and detention in Latin America and victims of political and gendered violence in various contexts. For an overview on the related concepts and debates see Mlodoch (2014, 29–66).

¹⁹Decades Later, Halabja Victims Still Dying of Wounds from Chemical Attacks. *Rudaw*, November 27, 2015. <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/271120153?keyword=Halabja&isArchive=True>. Accessed March 10, 2016.

²⁰Osamah Golpy. Tale of Two Cities: Halabja and New Halabja. *Rudaw*, March 24, 2015. <http://rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/240320152>. Accessed March 10, 2016.

In response to the mass exodus, Dutch and British troops set up safe havens for the refugees and the United Nations declared a no-fly zone over Iraq to prevent the Baath regime from carrying out airstrikes.²¹ In the wake of these events the Kurds achieved provisional autonomy and a Kurdish government was democratically elected in 1992. Anfal survivors started to reconstruct their villages and Halabja poison gas attack survivors returned to their home town, from then on referred to by all Kurds as *Halabja shehid*—the “martyr’s town of Halabja.”

Despite these first steps toward their safety, the survivors would stay in precarious conditions for another twelve years. The Kurdish Regional Government had not been internationally recognized; the Kurdish region suffered from international sanctions against the whole of Iraq and an additional embargo from Baghdad imposed on the Kurds. There was no trustworthy agreement about Kurdish autonomy with the Iraqi regime, and the fear that the Baath-regime will come back was pervasive throughout those years. Iran and Turkey frequently intervened militarily in the unstable region and from the mid-1990s the two main Kurdish political parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), engaged in a bloody internal struggle for power and resources that caused further violence and death in the region.²²

During all those years until 2003, Halabja poison gas survivors lived in a city of ruins, in extreme poverty, facing multiple new waves of violent conflict, and fearing that the Baath regime will come back and the catastrophe will recur. Absorbed in a daily struggle for survival they had no possibility to rest, take care of themselves, reconstruct their town and lives and thus regain some trust, courage, and hope. Instead, anger and bitterness added to their injury and exacerbated their suffering. In the 1990s the people of Halabja were outraged about the lack of assistance by both the Kurdish parties and government and the international community. They denounced Western countries’ previous complicity with the Iraqi Baath regime and its production of chemical weapons and urgently called upon the international community to engage in the reconstruction of Halabja. They felt betrayed and forgotten once again.²³

4.3 *Changes After 2003*

The situation only changed in 2003 with the second U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. In the run-up to the invasion, U.S. president George W. Bush made frequent reference to Saddam Hussein’s use of poison gas against his own population. After years of

²¹An overview on the developments and legal aspects of the international “humanitarian intervention” and the establishment of safe havens in Northern Iraq after the Kurdish mass exodus 1991 is given by Cook (1995).

²²Winter (2002) provides a comprehensive analysis of the provisional situation in Kurdistan-Iraq during the 1990s.

²³The author’s own observations visiting Halabja in the 1990s and talking to survivors.

silencing, the chemical attack against Halabja now became an argument for legitimizing the invasion.²⁴ This time the military invasion led to the demise of the Baath regime and as such was enthusiastically welcomed and celebrated all over Kurdistan. For the first time after 1988, a sense of safety was restored to the Halabja survivors. The sanctioning of Kurdistan as an autonomous region in a federal state of Iraq by the Iraqi constitution of 2005 brought about a sense of political stability. The main perpetrators—Saddam Hussein and Ali Hassan al-Majid—were sentenced to death by the Iraqi High Tribunal and executed. Al-Majid received four death sentences for crimes against humanity, war crimes, and genocide against the Kurds and was hanged in 2010. Saddam Hussein was already executed on December 30, 2006 for the massacres against Shiites in Dujail before the Anfal and Halabja trials had come to an end.²⁵ Internationally, there has been a highly controversial debate about the legitimacy of the trials because of the strong U.S. role in the set up of the trials, the victor's justice involved, and the non-compliance with international law standards.²⁶ However, for the Anfal and Halabja survivors, these trials—the fact that survivors gave testimonies in a court of law facing the main perpetrators—were important milestones for restoring their sense of justice and satisfaction. Yet many survivors were disappointed that Saddam Hussein was not executed for Halabja and Anfal, as they wanted his death to be linked in the historical record to these crimes (Mlodoch 2014, 364–365).

After 2003 the Kurdish region saw a rapid process of economic development and modernization, which brought improvement to the life conditions of the Anfal and Halabja survivors as well. The Kurdistan Regional Government finally started to invest in the destroyed areas' infrastructure. Survivors' pensions were raised; they received grants for building houses and their children stipends for university or college education. Today, the survivors' economic situation has improved. Those who were children during the chemical attacks have meanwhile grown up, started their own families, finished their education, and became a source of pride for the entire survivors' community. Indeed there are strong collective structures and a sense of community among the survivors due to the shared experience. All these changes have at last created the possibility for the survivors to take some rest and engage in the reconstruction of their town and their social structures.

Mamosta Fakhradin, who saw two of his children die in his arms on March 16, 1988, is today a teacher at a primary school in Halabja and says that he regards each of his students as his own child (Hidou 2011). A young man in Ako Sirini's 2013 documentary who was a baby when he lost his parents in the gas attack talks about the day he took his degree at the Medical School. However, he said it was a sad day

²⁴See, e.g., George W. Bush's speech at the 2003 Azores Summit in Portugal. President Bush: Monday "Moment of Truth" for World on Iraq. March 16, 2003. <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/03/20030316-3.html>. Accessed March 10, 2016.

²⁵For the documentation of the trials see International Center for Transitional Justice (2006a, b).

²⁶For an overview on the debate see Mlodoch (2014, 348–358).

for him as he imagined how proud he would have made his parents coming home with the university certificate. He is now practicing medicine in Halabja. The other young man in the film who lost his parents has become an artist. He gives art lectures to young people and says that he wants to bring color back to Halabja. They are examples of how survivors live with haunting memories and indelible images, but at the same time try to relate to the present and engage in reconstructing their lives.

Today Halabja is step by step turning into a lively town again. Streets and markets are crowded; the town has playgrounds, schools, a university, women centers, and cultural projects. The reconstruction of the town of Halabja gives a sense of triumph to survivors over the destructive impact of the poison gas. Yet the scars of the past and its representation are visible everywhere. Besides the huge graveyard for the victims with the endless-looking rows of 5,000 tombstones and the huge central memorial at the outskirts of the town, there are numerous smaller memorials, art pieces and wall inscriptions reminding of the poison gas attack all over the town.

However, there is still an intense feeling of rage and bitterness among Halabja survivors. They feel exploited by the Kurdish national discourse and political elite, who define the chemical attack against Halabja as a national trauma but fall short of addressing the survivors' claims and needs. At the occasion of an official remembrance ceremony at the Halabja anniversary in 2006, survivors turned against the attendant Kurdish politicians and their guests, demanding better services instead of high-profile ceremonies and ultimately set the central Halabja monument ablaze (Hiltermann 2008).²⁷

Survivors are also bitter about the lack of international assistance and recognition. They strongly call upon international governments and parliaments to recognize the Anfal and Halabja attacks as genocidal and to take to justice the international companies which delivered supplies for the poison-gas production to Saddam Hussein's regime. Indeed, although UNSCOM inspections and the Baath regime's confiscated documents brought evidence about the implication of European and specifically West German companies in Iraq's poison gas production in the 1980s (Kelly 2013), there has not been to date any noteworthy legal prosecution of those responsible. Only one Dutch businessman, Frans van Anraat, whose company had delivered thousands of tons of chemical substances to the Iraqi regime in the 1980s, has been convicted to 17 years in prison for supporting war crimes by a District Court in The Hague in 2005, but was acquitted of the charge of supporting genocide (Oñate et al. 2007).

²⁷See also Robert F. Worth. Kurds Destroy Monument in Rage at Leadership. *New York Times*, March 17, 2006. http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/17/international/middleeast/17kurds.html?_r. Accessed March 10, 2016.



Fig. 1 On the anniversary of the poison gas attack, activists in Halabja protest against the chemical attack on Ghouta, Syria. March 16, 2015. WADI e.V. <https://wadi-online.org/2016/03/16/halabja-day-2016-end-the-impunity/>. Accessed June 26, 2017. Photo reproduced with permission from WADI e.V.

5 New Threats, New Fear, and Joint Initiatives of Poison Gas Survivors

After a period of stabilization, the Kurdish people in Iraq are currently facing new threats. In 2014 the terror militia ISIS took control of large parts of Central and Northern Iraq and committed horrendous massacres of especially the Yazidi Kurds. Once again Kurdish *peshmerga* are fighting and dying in combat, this time against ISIS. Once again the region is mired in conflict and violence, which stir up the traumatic memories of the Halabja and Anfal survivors. Over a million people who fled from ISIS terror in the provinces of Mossul and Central Iraq and another 250,000 Syrian Kurds who fled the war in their country currently seek refuge in Kurdistan-Iraq.²⁸

Evidence suggests that in August 2013 chemical weapons were used against civilians by the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad in the Ghouta area of Damascus (UN Mission to Syria 2013). Survivors from Ghouta and survivors from Halabja jointly founded an initiative named “Breathless.”²⁹ On April 22, 2015, the

²⁸United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Iraq 3RP Summary 2016: Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan. March 3, 2016. <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/44046>. Accessed March 10, 2016.

²⁹See <https://www.facebook.com/Breathless-830986016974121/>.

100th anniversary of the first use of poison gas by the German Army during World War I at Ypres, they came together in parallel commemoration activities in Kurdistan-Iraq and Syria and jointly called upon the international community to curb the use of chemical weapons in warfare, stating: “It takes one second to drop the bomb, but it takes decades to overcome its impact”.³⁰ On the occasion of the anniversary of the chemical attack on Halabja on March 16, 2015, activists in Halabja commemorated the attack on their town in 1988 and at the same time protested against the chemical attacks in Ghouta. They held up signs asking: “After Halabja you said: Never again. After Ghouta you said: Never again. What will you say next time?”(Fig. 1).

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³⁰Open Letter by Survivors of Chemical Attacks from Iraq, Syria, Iran and Kurdistan. “It Takes a Second to Drop a Bomb, But It Takes Decades to Overcome Its Impacts.” *Breathless*. April 22, 2015. <https://www.facebook.com/Breathless-830986016974121/>. Accessed March 10, 2016.

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