





SPECIAL FOCUS

Revisiting Legacies of Anfal and Reconsidering Genocide in the Middle East Today: Collective Memory, Victimhood, Resilience, and Enduring Trauma

Dr. Ibrahim Sadiq¹ , Dr. Bahar Baser^{2,3}  and Dr. Stephen McLoughlin⁴

¹Soran University, Soran, Erbil, Iraq, ²Durham University, Durham, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, ³Stellenbosch University, South Africa and ⁴Coventry University, Coventry, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
Email: ibrahim.sadiq@SORAN.EDU.IQ, bahar.baser@coventry.ac.uk and stephen.mcloughlin@coventry.ac.uk

Introduction

Since the end of World War I, the people of the Middle East have lived – from Turkey to Iraq – in a world created by Woodrow Wilson, David Lloyd George, and Georges Clemenceau. From the outset, the victorious powers of the War, especially Wilson, paid lip service to the principle of self-determination in addressing various nationalities, but they soon realized this great principle can be a double-edged sword whose use could cost them dearly – in casualties as well as capital. Western and regional powers resolved this dilemma by installing a system of states in the Middle East, in the name of self-determination, which was in fact appallingly unfair and feeble. Implementation of this policy in the face of multi-ethnic milieus and complexities, where the dominant group constituted no more than 50 percent of the population, had disastrous consequences and fractured the social landscape of the region into distinct camps of winners and losers.

The Kurds lost out. Deprived of a nation-state, they were forced to live under the national jurisdiction of four newly established states: Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and later Syria. The creation of these states ignored the multinational, multilinguistic, and multicultural composition of the territory. In fact, the new rulers of these states often resorted to extreme violence and propaganda to build ethnocentric states, which undermined the diversity within their borders. Realization of this policy could not be reached without the destruction of ethnic and linguistic minorities such as the Kurds.

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Thus, before the establishment of the new Turkish state, Mustafa Kemal promised the Kurds inclusion in the new state, welcoming them as a fellow Muslim nation. Thousands of Kurdish youth shed their blood in the war for Turkey's independence. In return, the Kurds were not only excluded, but the state was given an ethno-centric name. The process of eradicating the Kurds from the Turkish political scene began on a large scale. The first atrocities began in 1937 with the Dersim massacre. Hundreds of thousands of Kurds were deported to Turkish cities, to the extent that the Kurdish language was completely banned and thousands were imprisoned.¹ Discrimination and human rights violations against Kurds continue to do this day, and the issue of Kurdish self-determination in Turkey remains unresolved.

In Iraq, the 1931 British-Iraqi agreement provided the right of self-rule for the Kurdish territory in the north of the country. But after the British withdrawal, instead of implementing the treaty, the marginalization of the Kurds, along with the policy of Arabization, began in the worst possible way. The 1963 Iraqi National Guard campaign against the Kurds prompted Vietnam to pass a draft resolution calling on the United Nations to recognize the campaign against the Kurds in Iraq as genocide, but the Soviet Union blocked the resolution. Then the process of genocide began on a large scale against different Kurdish communities. It started with the genocide of the Faili Kurds in the capital, Baghdad, and the provinces of Wasit, Divala, and other regions. The Faili victims who were killed, subsequently called "the disappeared," are estimated at more than 22,000, and those deported to Iran numbered more than half a million. Then, throughout the 1970s, the authority started the deportation and destruction of thousands of Kurdish villages and towns. In 1983, the Barzani genocide, which claimed the lives of 8,000 Barzani males, were followed by the Anfal campaigns, in which more than 183,000 people were buried in mass graves.²

The Iranian state's campaign against the Kurds has been no less brutal than those of Turkey and Iraq. The Kurdish language is still banned in schools and universities. Cultural racism and ethnic cleansing continued without interruption during the Shah's regime and later during the Islamic Republic of Iran.³ With the triumph of the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and then the advent of political Islam throughout the region, the Kurds emerged as the main challenger to this new political ideology, and they have been struggling to push back the control of the Islamists, inch by inch, to recapture the spheres of their public life that came under severe attack over the past 40 years. The outcome of this prolonged battle was, and still is, of crucial importance to the people in other Muslim societies in which Islamic ideology has gained hegemony.

¹ Ibrahim Efe and Bernhard Forchtner, " 'Saying Sorry' in Turkey: The Dersim Massacre of the 1930s," *Journal of Language and Politics* 14.2 (2011): 233-57.

² Ibrahim Sadiq, *Origins of the Kurdish Genocide: Nation Building and Genocide as a Civilizing and De-civilizing Process* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021).

³ Martin van Bruinessen, "The Kurds between Iran and Iraq," *Middle East Research and Information Project Report* 141 (1982): 14-27; Farideh Koochi-Kamali, *The Political Development of the Kurds in Iran: Pastoral nationalism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Denise Natali, *The Kurds and the State: Evolving National Identity in Iraq, Turkey, and Iran* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2005).

In 1960s Syria, after a long period of marginalization, the Syrian regime declared an Arabization belt along its borders with Iraqi Kurdistan and Turkey's Kurdistan in order to isolate the Kurds across the border. Then they built dozens of settlements in Kurdish territory and moved thousands of Arabs to these stations, which were prepared with all the necessities for settlement. More than 300,000 Kurds were deprived from citizenship, basic rights, education, and a humane life.⁴

The Special Issue

Throughout much of the twentieth century, Kurdish communities across the Middle East were subject to genocide and other atrocities, as they put up strong resistance to state-led oppression. Despite the extreme violence, they continued to wage resolute battles against these ethno-centric authoritarian states. This special issue is dedicated to creating an understanding of the legacies of such mass atrocities. It is specifically focused on the Anfal genocide and the issues surrounding it. This year, 2023, marks the 34th anniversary of the Anfal genocide. The Anfal Campaigns were a series of operations launched by Saddam Hussein against mostly rural communities in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, between February and March 1988. Enacted as a “final solution” against a rebellious Kurdish population, this series of campaigns took the lives of 180,000 unarmed civilians, culminating in “the world’s first chemical assault against non-combatants” in Halabja on March 16, 1988. It took about two years to prepare, organize, and implement these operations, with phases including aerial bombing, ground attacks, and chemical weapons. Many of the survivors were arrested and transferred to concentration camps in the South. The men, women, and children detainees were separated, with teenage and adult males pulled aside and executed, often shot with firearms, or buried alive with bulldozers. The Iraqi Government officially recognized these crimes against humanity as genocide and only a few European states have conducted discussions concerning genocide in their parliaments. Many states avoid acknowledging the Anfal Campaigns as constituting genocide with official statements at the governmental level to avoid legal liability for selling arms and chemical weapons to the Ba‘ath regime.⁵ Many Kurds believe that justice has still not been served. No formal apology has been made and no fair compensation mechanism was put in place. During the last few years, the Kurdistan Regional Government has been trying to internationalize these issues and seek recognition at the international level through diplomatic channels and diaspora support. It can be argued that lack of genocide recognition at the global scale also contributed to future mass atrocities in the region. Two and a half

⁴ Harriet Allsopp, *The Kurds of Syria: Political Parties and Identity in the Middle East* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016); Jordi Tejel, *Syria's Kurds: History, Politics and Society* (London: Routledge, 2009).

⁵ Bahar Baser and Mari Toivanen, “The Politics of Genocide Recognition: Kurdistan Nation-Building and Commemoration in the Post-Saddam Era,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 19.3 (2017): 404-26; Choman Hardi, *Gendered Experiences of Genocide: Anfal Survivors in Kurdistan-Iraq*, (London: Routledge, 2016).

decades after the Anfal Campaigns, the Islamic State (ISIS) launched another “Anfal” in terms of its meaning and committed genocidal massacres and other atrocities against the Yazidi people. Five thousand were killed and thousands of girls were forced into sexual slavery.

This special issue has been put together after a conference organized jointly by the guest editors in June 2021. The aim of the conference was to readdress the legacies of Anfal on Kurdish societies and other communities in the Middle East from an interdisciplinary perspective. It aimed at reflecting on lessons learned from the past, and to re-evaluate the challenges of and responses to the mass atrocities in the Middle East today. It also asked questions about the extent to which the memory of past massacres have contributed to policies, practices and initiatives that aim to provide greater resilience against the risk of future atrocities. In that sense, it also scrutinized the politics behind the commemoration of the Anfal genocide. We brought scholars from different strands together to discuss the politics of genocide recognition and denial as well as questioning genocide prevention mechanisms and the silence of the international community during mass atrocities.

Kamal Aziz Ketuly’s article investigates the Anfal operations against the Kurds by the Saddam regime with a specific focus on hostages taken and deportations. He questions whether the legacies of Anfal is over and clearly demonstrates that the survivors have not been compensated for their material and non-material losses. Nabaz Samad Ahmed picks up on this discussion and debates whether there is a link between totalitarianism and genocide. He specifically unpacks how totalitarian regimes justify genocides by engaging Hannah Arendt’s work on such regimes. The article argues that the application of Arendt’s theory of totalitarianism to the *Anfal* (“spoils of war”) and Ba’athism in Iraq can help us better understand the justifications, features, and motivations of Ba’athist genocide against Kurds.

Nahwi Saeed’s article scrutinizes transitional justice efforts in Kurdistan against the Kurdish *Jash* commanders and *Mustashars* who were complicit in the genocidal operations. This article is one of the first articles in the literature which discusses transitional justice efforts beyond those against Saddam Hussein regime. The author critically discusses the results of the blanket amnesty that has been granted toward the collaborators at the expense of victims’ expectations. Saeed concludes that the blanket amnesty negatively affected the process of democratization, rule of law, and social reconciliation in the region. Ibrahim Sadiq and Media Fattah’s article adopts a gender lens and specifically focuses on the Barzani killings in 1983. On July 31, Saddam’s regime arrested at least 8,000 men, boys, and children who were all subsequently killed and dumped in mass graves. These killings led to the emergence of a community consisting of women and children left traumatized and isolated in prisons inside neglected and besieged compounds controlled by Iraqi security forces. The article provides insights into understanding the challenges that these single mothers faced in the aftermath of this ethnic cleansing act by demonstrating the altered gender roles as these widows raised their children.

The article by Hawraman Karim and Bahar Baser focuses on the collective memory in Kurdistan that occurred as a result of the chemical attack on

Halabja, on March 16, 1988. The authors present a brief summary of current debates on memory and reconciliation in post-genocide societies and examines how collective memory and postmemory is formed among the survivors and their descendants in Halabja. Based on extensive interviews in Halabja, the authors try to unpack politics of commemoration as well as the community's expectations from the authorities as well as the international community.

Said Shams draws our attention to the cultural dimensions of racism and ethnic cleansing, this time shifting the focus to Iran and its treatment of minorities. By applying a Foucauldian lens, he explains Iran's approach to political Islam and how it shapes its attitudes towards the Kurdish community in the country.

The article by Mohammad Salih Mustafa an Abdulrahman Karim Darwesh investigates ISIS's ideological motivations and its anti-Kurdish attacks as part of its strategy in Middle Eastern power games. The article claims that ISIS was motivated by a deep-rooted nationalistic antagonism against the Kurdish population despite its claims over Islamic community as a whole. The authors successfully show the Arab nationalist elements in its behaviour.

Hawre Ahmed's article ends the special issue with a thorough study of ISIS attacks against the Yazidi community in 2014. These brutal acts toward the Yazidi community included deliberate killings, infliction of serious bodily or mental harm, physical and psychological warfare, prevention births within the Yazidi community, and trafficking Yazidi children. The article unpacks the Genocide Convention and clarifies why the suffering of Yazidis should be defined as an act of genocide.

Thus, this special issue scrutinizes legacies of a violent past: a reality that the Kurds have endured through modern history. Hopefully, these articles pave the way to create more awareness about this history of Kurdish suffering and leads to a global recognition of these crimes so as to prevent their repetition. Although the articles in the special issue present multifaceted explanations about what has happened and the aftermath of mass violence from interdisciplinary perspectives, there are still many hidden aspects in these four countries that needs to be researched and worked on in the future. It is an important area for genocide scholars to discover, research and promote.

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