

IRAQI USE OF CHEMICAL WEAPONS: ATTACKS ON THE KURDS

The Iran-Iraq War lasted from 1980 until 1988. During that conflict, the Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussein violated the 1925 Geneva Protocol by using chemical weapons, including in a deliberate campaign against the Kurdish ethnic group living on the border between the two countries. In a campaign known as al-Anfal, Iraqi troops attacked approximately 200 towns and villages using a variety of chemicals, including mustard gas, sarin, tabun, and VX. The assault on Halabja, a Kurdish city of 80,000 is the most well-known of these attacks – leaving 5,000 dead and 10,000 wounded. Overall, the number of Kurds that perished during the Iraqi campaign is estimated to be between 50,000 and 182,000.¹

Background

The Kurds are a distinct Middle-Eastern ethnic group of about 25 million, spread primarily across four countries in Southwest Asia: Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey. In Iraq, the Kurds constitute about 15 to 20 percent of the population.



Following World War I, the Kurds were promised their own country through the 1920 Treaty of Sevres.² Subsequent Turkish objections to the formation of an independent state prevented the creation of Kurdistan and

¹ From the U.S. State Department website: <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/9041.pdf>

² From the Treaty of Sevres, 1920, Section III, Kurdistan, Articles 62-64.

ARTICLE 62: A Commission sitting at Constantinople and composed of three members appointed by the British, French and Italian Governments respectively shall draft within six months from the coming into force of the present Treaty a scheme of local autonomy for the predominantly Kurdish areas lying east of the Euphrates, south of the southern boundary of Armenia as it may be hereafter determined, and north of the frontier of Turkey with Syria and Mesopotamia, as defined in Article 27, II (2) and (3). If unanimity cannot be secured on any question, it will be referred by the members of the Commission to their respective Governments. The scheme shall contain full safeguards for the protection of the Assyro-Chaldeans and other racial or religious minorities within these areas, and with this object a Commission composed of British, French, Italian, Persian and Kurdish representatives shall visit the spot to examine and decide what rectifications, if any, should be made in the Turkish frontier where, under the provisions of the present Treaty, that frontier coincides with that of Persia.

ARTICLE 63: The Turkish Government hereby agrees to accept and execute the decisions of both the Commissions mentioned in Article 62 within three months from their communication to the said Government.

ARTICLE 64: If within one year from the coming into force of the present Treaty the Kurdish peoples within the areas defined in Article 62 shall address themselves to the Council of the League of Nations in such a manner as to show that a majority of the population of these areas desires independence from Turkey, and if the Council then considers that these peoples are capable of such independence and recommends that it should be granted to them, Turkey hereby agrees to execute such a recommendation, and to renounce all rights and title over these areas. The detailed provisions for such renunciation will form the subject of a separate agreement between the Principal Allied Powers and Turkey. If and when such renunciation

the Kurdish population was split among the previously mentioned four nations. Despite this setback, the Kurds continued to express a strong desire for independence, leading to ongoing clashes with the countries that they inhabited.

These separatist sentiments were the source of conflict with the Iraqi government. Change in the situation seemed possible when, in 1970, Iraq and the Kurds brokered an agreement, concerning linguistic rights, autonomy within the Kurdish region and possible participation in government. The agreement fell through, due to failures in Iraqi implementation, which furthered tensions between Iraq and the Kurds. Adding to the growing animosity, the Kurds allied themselves with Iran, first during a territorial dispute with Iraq in the 1970s, and again during the Iran-Iraq War.

The Iran-Iraq War

The Iran-Iraq War began in September 1980 when Iraq invaded Iran. The war developed out of a variety of conflicts, including disputes over the Iran-Iraq border, and political and religious differences. Saddam Hussein hoped to take advantage of Iran's internal difficulties, caused by the recent revolution. The Kurds' decision to side with Iran during this conflict, and their unfortunate position of inhabiting the border between Iraq and Iran, made them a significant target for Saddam's military.

One of the defining aspects of the war was Iraq's blatant use of chemical weapons, despite the country's participation in the 1925 Geneva Protocol, a treaty which banned the use of chemical weapons on other signatory members.³ Both sides used chemical weapons during this war, but Saddam proved his willingness to gas his own citizens, the Kurds, repeatedly.

Al-Anfal

The chemical weapons attacks on the Kurds were part of a campaign planned and arranged Saddam Hussein and his cousin, Ali Hassan al-Majid. They dubbed the campaign "al-Anfal," an Arabic term meaning "the spoils." The Iraqis were able to attack approximately 200 Kurdish villages and town during the Iran-Iraq War.⁴ During the war, it is estimated that Iraqi forces killed approximately 100,000 people. The evidence of chemical weapons use, particularly mustard gas and tabun⁵, was found in soil samples taken from several of these villages.

The first attacks took place in 1983, where Iraqi troops used mustard gas. During the following years, the number of incidents remained relatively small until 1987 when Iraq began significantly increasing its attacks on the Kurds. The majority of these attacks took place in 1988 and involved the use of mustard gas. The most well-known attack, which used both mustard and variety of nerve agents, occurred in March 1988, against the city of Halabja.

Iraqi Targets

1983: Hajj Umran, Panjwin

1988: Takiyeh, Balagjir, Goktapa, Wara, Balisan, Hiran, Sheikh Wasan, Bileh and Halabja.

takes place, no objection will be raised by the Principal Allied Powers to the voluntary adhesion to such an independent Kurdish State of the Kurds inhabiting that part of Kurdistan which has hitherto been included in the Mosul vilayet.

³From the *Protocol for the Prohibition of the Use in War of Asphyxiating, Poisonous or Other Gases, and of Bacteriological Methods of Warfare*, signed 17 June 1925:

The undersigned Plenipotentiaries, in the name of their respective governments: Whereas the use in war of asphyxiating, poisonous or other gases, and of all analogous liquids, materials or devices, has been justly condemned by the general opinion of the civilised world; and Whereas the prohibition of such use has been declared in Treaties to which the majority of Powers of the world are Parties; and To the end that this prohibition shall be universally accepted as a part of International Law, binding alike the conscience and the practice of nations;

⁴ Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Great Terror," *The New Yorker*, March 25, 2002, p. 52.

⁵From the Stimson Center website: Mustard gas, or sulfur mustard, is a colorless to amber oily liquid with an odor of garlic capable of causing blisters on the skin and damage to the respiratory tract, mucous membranes, and eyes. The nerve agent tabun is a brownish to colorless liquid with odor ranging from none to fruity. It disables the enzymes that allow for the transmission of nerve impulses.

Documented Iraqi Use of Chemical Weapons on the Kurds ⁶				
Date	Area Used	Type of Agent	Approximate Casualties	Target Population
Aug 1983	Hajj Umran	Mustard	fewer than 100	Iranians/Kurds
Oct-Nov 1983	Panjwin	Mustard	3,000	Iranian/Kurds
Mar 1988	Halabja	Mustard/nerve agents	hundreds	Iranians/Kurds

Halabja

The attack on Halabja, a town of 80,000 to 90,000 people, is the largest chemical attack against civilians in history. The four-day assault began on the morning of 16 March 1988. Having just attacked Iraqi outposts near Halabja, Iranian troops stationed themselves within the city. The Iraqi Army was positioned on the main road from the nearby town of Sayid Sadiq. At 11am, the army fired artillery shells into Halabja, and the air force began dropping what is thought to have been napalm on the town, especially the northern area. By mid-afternoon, the chemical attacks began, with a cocktail that included mustard gas, sarin, tabun, and VX,⁷ using aerial bombs, 122-millimeter rockets, and conventional artillery shells as the delivery methods. Dr. Christine Gosden, a medical geneticist at the University of Liverpool, studied the attack victims intensively and testified to Congress that aflatoxin, dissolved in tear gas, was also used.

It is estimated that the chemicals killed 5,000 and injured 10,000, a casualty rate of 20%. Survivors are still suffering from high incidence rates of cancer, blindness, congenital malformations, and infertility.

⁶ From the CIA website: http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/iraq_wmd/Iraq_Oct_2002.htm#05

⁷ From the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute website: <http://editors.sipri.se/pubs/Factsheet/unscom.html>