

Thirty years after the Halabja Genocide: Iraq Still Punishes the Kurds

by [Yerevan Saeed \(/experts/yerevan-saeed\)](#)

Mar 16, 2018

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Yerevan Saeed \(/experts/yerevan-saeed\)](#)

Yerevan Saeed is a Ph.D. candidate at the Carter School of Peace and Conflict Resolution, George Mason. He previously served as White House Correspondent for Kurdish Rudaw TV and has worked for news agencies including the New York Times, NPR, the Wall Street Journal, the Boston Globe, the BBC, and The Guardian as a journalist and translator.



Brief Analysis

March is a bittersweet month for Kurds. It is the month for celebrating the Kurdish uprising against Saddam Hussein in 1991, the original declaration of Kurdish autonomy 1970, and most notably Nowruz, which Kurds consider their national day of freedom and welcoming spring. But, March is also the time of mourning. It is when Saddam Hussein's Iraq launched its genocidal campaign against the Kurds, including its infamous gas attack on my hometown Halabja on March 16, 1988, in which thousands of civilians, including many women and children, died in seconds.

Thirty years after the chemical attack, Halabja and its wounded survivors are still suffering from the aftermath. This suffering has been exacerbated by current Iraqi government's psychological and economic warfare against Kurds. Iraq banned international flights to and from Kurdistan's airports in retaliation for the independence referendum there last September. But, long before that, Baghdad has withheld Kurdish regional budgets since 2014. Its Shia-dominated parliament has worked to further suffocate Kurdistan financially. Only this week, at long last, is the Iraqi government belatedly signaling its intention to relax some of these draconian punishments.

Meanwhile, all these punitive measures continue to have harmful impacts on Halabja chemical survivors, physically, psychologically and financially. Medicines in Halabja hospitals are undersupplied. This has deteriorated medical conditions for many of the gas survivors who are in need of continuous medical care and support. Psychologically, Iraq's embargo has taken a heavy toll on their mental health. Financially, these victims are not able to support themselves and their families because Baghdad has refused to release the Kurdish share of the Iraqi national budget.

The closure of the international airports has also been quite problematic for these survivors. First, it has led to restrictions on international aid to Kurdistan, including medical supplies. Secondly, these wounded survivors face tremendous difficulty traveling outside of Kurdistan for medical care. Because of the liberal visa system Kurdistan had, foreign medical specialists were able to visit Halabja and see the patients. This is not the case anymore because flights are banned and now a visa is required by the Iraqi government for foreigners seeking to enter Kurdistan.

More broadly, Baghdad's economic war on Kurds has been quite detrimental to the education sector. More than half of Kurdistan schools are closed. Teachers don't attend school because they have remained unpaid. This has left

Kurdish students in disarray. Indeed, if Iraq ever considered Kurds as equal citizens, it should have never let the health and the education sectors be jeopardized due to the political difference with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). The collective punishment of Kurds is evidence that the mentality of the rulers in Baghdad has not been transformed: they see Kurds through a prism of security and threat.

On a personal level, I have become a refugee four times, including three times before I was eleven years old. During the chemical attack of 1988, my mom lost her father. My father lost over twenty members of his family, including several aunts and most of his cousins. Many of my classmates from kindergarten and elementary school were suffocated by the chemical bombs Iraqi fighter jets dropped on Halabja. Many others whom I know were wounded and are still suffering from the aftermath of the attack. It is only thanks to the caves in the mountains of Kurdistan that I am alive today.

To be alive, however, is painful when confronted with Iraq's refusal to apologize for its crimes. It has failed to make reparations to Halabja and to millions of displaced Kurds. Of course, apology and reparations will not bring back those who lost their lives. But denial of the justice compounds the crime because such denial lives with you every moment of your life. Thirty years ago, the international community was dumb and deaf to what happened to the Kurds in Iraq. But now they are fully aware of Iraq's unjust measures to punish Kurds. This is not genocide, but silence is still tacit approval of what Baghdad is doing.

Instead, for the sake of peace and stability, the international community must stand up to Iraq's bullying of the Kurds. The alternative is a constant cycle of vicious violence in which almost three decades of American state-building efforts will unravel. As poverty rises, extremism becomes attractive and violent nationalism replaces much-needed reconciliation.

This is not to put all the blame on Iraq's side. But Baghdad as a federal government has a bigger responsibility. If it does not want Kurds to go for independence, it should seek to address their political, legal and economic grievances. As a step towards confidence building, Iraq can take conciliatory steps by releasing some funding for Kurdish civil servants, as a sign of goodwill.

In the meantime, the KRG also has to be willing to take measures that are consistent with the Iraqi constitution, which includes cooperation on the borders and airports. However, the implementation of the constitution should not be cherry-picking. That should also include resolution of the status of Kirkuk and other disputed areas.

The KRG and the federal government's differences have produced only animosity and resentment for both governments and political elites. It might have been the hope of Baghdad for Kurdish citizens to rise up against their own regional government, which is plagued with corruption and cronyism. But the fact is it would be very unlikely for Kurdish people to replace an indigenous corrupt government with a corrupt non-Kurdish federal government -- which is also an alien for them, at least at the moment. Thus, it is high time for both sides stop playing politics and further victimizing their people. They should both focus on good governance and genuine reconciliation instead. ❖

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