

# Anfal

Anfal is the name of the most tragic period in the modern history of the Iraqi Kurds, a series of events that have received some international recognition as genocide. It refers to an operation by the army of former President Saddam Hussein in an extensive, mostly rural, area of the Kurdistan Region between 23 February and 6 September 1988 in which at least 50,000 were killed, some by chemical weapons, and many more displaced.

## Facts and figures

Estimates vary about the number of people killed. Human Rights Watch's 1993 book on Anfal ["Genocide in Iraq: The Anfal Campaign Against the Kurds"](#) remains the most authoritative study on the subject. The book is based on field interviews with 350 people, most of them Anfal survivors, and Iraqi government documents seized by Kurdish forces during the 1991 uprising.

According to this book, "50,000 by the most conservative estimate, and possibly twice that number" of civilians were killed. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and Kurdish political parties estimate that 182,000 people were killed, but the number has never been verified.

The operation targeted areas across the Kurdistan Region that included large swathes of farmland and orchards. According to Human Rights Watch, at least 2,000 villages and dozens of towns were completely destroyed – often burned or razed to the ground. Kurdish sources estimate that 5,000 villages were destroyed.

Large numbers of non-combatant villagers, chiefly men but also women and children, were captured and killed. After the US invasion in 2003, remains of hundreds of Anfal victims were found in mass graves in the southern deserts of Iraq.

Others were arrested. Those who were not were forcibly resettled in "collective towns" built specifically to house these people near large urban centres. The areas where these people had been living were then declared prohibited areas.

After the 1991 uprising, the displaced began returning to their homes and the KRG began rebuilding these areas with assistance from the international community. However, the affected communities and the local environment has yet to fully recover from the impact of the devastating operation.

## Background

The Kurds rose up against the Iraqi government in the 1970s and 1980s. From the mid-1980s the Iraqi government had begun to step up attacks against the Kurdish insurgency in the countryside with tactics that included the use of chemical weapons.

By 1988 the eight-year Iran-Iraq war was winding down. Much of the Kurdish countryside was under the control of Kurdish insurgents – led by the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). Baghdad began to redirect its military resources away from the frontlines with Iran and deploy them against the Kurds.

The first phase of Anfal began with a siege of the PUK headquarters in the villages of Sargalu and Bargalu, north of Sulaimaniyah, and ended in the countryside of Duhok. As the operation began in Sulaimaniyah the province bore the brunt of the atrocities. The lowlands of the Garmiyan area near Kalar and Chamchamal were particularly badly affected as locals were unable to hide in mountainous terrain or flee to border areas.

## **Chemical weapons and Halabja**

Saddam's cousin Ali Hassan Al-Majid, nicknamed "Chemical Ali" by the Kurds, is often referred to as the mastermind behind Anfal. The year before the operation began, he was appointed head of the northern Iraq branch of the Baath Party and granted special powers equivalent to that of the president for the area.

His nickname derives from the use of chemical weapons a number of times against Kurdish villages and the subsequent gassing of the town of Halabja on 16 and 17 March 1988, killing 5,000 people and injuring thousands more.

## **Trial**

In 2006, the Iraqi Special Tribunal announced that former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and six other former Iraqi officials would stand trial over Anfal. In January 2007, the charges were dropped against Saddam after his execution the previous month for crimes against humanity in the Dujail massacre.

In June 2007, Majid, former Iraq Defence Minister Sultan Hashim and former military commander Hussein Rashid al-Tikriti were convicted of genocide and sentenced to death for their roles in the Anfal campaign. Two other officials were also given life sentences and another was acquitted.

The tribunal also called for over 250 mustashars (Kurdish mercenary chiefs) in charge of local pro-government paramilitary forces to be put on trial for collaborating with the Iraqi army. They have yet to face justice and many of them are now close to the KDP and PUK.

## **Terms and definitions**

Anfal, which means "the spoils of war" in Arabic, is the title of the eighth chapter of the Koran and was the name given to the operation by the Iraqi regime.

The term is used broadly by some Kurdish and non-Kurdish sources to refer to all the major Iraqi atrocities against the Kurds in the 1980s.

The Anfal operation was recognized as genocide against the Kurds by the Iraqi government in 2007. In 2012 and 2013, the UK, Sweden, Norway and South Korea did the same.