



SPECIAL FOCUS: REVISITING LEGACIES OF ANFAL AND RECONSIDERING GENOCIDE IN THE MIDDLE EAST TODAY: COLLECTIVE MEMORY, VICTIMHOOD, RESILIENCE AND ENDURING TRAUMA

The Deportations and First Anfal of Faily Kurds in Iraq

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Abstract

On April 4th, 1980, Saddam Hussein's government initiated a mass deportation of Iraqi citizens to Iran. In total, an estimated one million people were deported between 1980 and 1990. At the same time, thousands of the relatives of these deportees were detained as hostages, an estimated 4,000 of whom are still missing. This is considered the first Anfal operation undertaken by the Ba'athist regime against the Kurds.

Keywords: Faily Kurds; Disappeared Hostages; Deportations; First Anfal

On April 4th, 1980, six months before Saddam Hussein ordered the invasion of Iran,¹ he commenced the deportation of Iraqi citizens to Iran. Over the next ten years, over a million Iraqis were deported to Iran. Roughly half of them were Faily Kurds, while the others were Arabs, Persians, and Turkomans. Their belongings, homes, money, and passports were all confiscated. To silence protest on the part of the deportees, and to prevent retaliatory action, the Iraqi authorities detained members of each family as hostages – approximately 1 detainee for every 10 deportees.² For the one million people who were deported, there may have been as many as 100,000 such detainees – although the exact number is hard to estimate. Many of these hostages were quickly released; but those who were not were held in Abu Ghraib.

¹ BBC News, "On This Day. 1980: War breaks out between Iran and Iraq," September 22, 1980, http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/september/22/newsid_4242000/4242336.stm.

² Kamal Aziz Ketuly, "Jamal Ketuly and Disappeared Iraqi Hostages Case during Saddam Era," Facebook page, <https://web.facebook.com/Jamal-Ketuly-and-disappeared-iraqi-hostages-case-during-Saddam-Era-102185321543250>; *Shafaq News*, "The Curse of '666': A Pen Stroke That Wiped Out Thousands of Fayli Kurds," April 3, 2021, <https://shafaq.com/en/Report/The-curse-of-666-a-pen-stroke-that-wiped-out-thousands-of-Fayli-Kurds>; Roger Hardy, "The Iran-Iraq war: 25 years on, 2005," *BBC News*, September 22, 2005, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4260420.stm.



During the Iran–Iraq war many of the remaining hostages were sent to the front to be used as human shields or to clear mine-fields. Others died as the result of being used in chemical or biological warfare experiments.³ Still more died from disease or from the harsh conditions in their places of detention. Between 1986 and 1989, a further number of the hostages were released.⁴

The remaining hostages were accused of being of “Iranian Origin,” although many of them were completing military service when detained. They were held in, and moved frequently between, some 30 prisons and concentration camps throughout Iraq. All efforts to discover the fate of these prisoners have so far been fruitless, although the whole area was under military satellite surveillance. The number who were alive in March 2003, on the eve of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, is hard to estimate, since the last known contact with any of the hostages occurred in 1988. However, the Committee for the Release of Hostages and Detainees in Iraq (CROHDI) had the names and details of 938 of them and calculated that about three times that number were unaccounted for.⁵ When the prisons were thrown open after Saddam Hussein’s downfall on April 9th, 2003, CROHDI was able to identify only 230 of the captives on its list. They were all dead. Soon it became apparent that the rest had disappeared, and the search for their fate is continuing.⁶

Despite the Iraqi government’s contentions, these detainees were not prisoners of war. Even if they were, there would be no grounds to keep them as hostages as the Iran–Iraq war has long since been over. The hostages were not criminals either. They were not accused of any crime, let alone convicted. Nor were they prisoners of conscience or political prisoners.⁷ Many of the hostages’ relatives sincerely believe that the remaining detainees are being held in order to exchange them for Iraqi prisoners of war still held by Iran. However, it is not clear why Iran should want to exchange Iraqi prisoners of war for another group of Iraqi citizens. Since there never was a legitimate reason for Iraq to detain these civilians, they should be released – if any of them are still being held. In addition, their families are entitled, under international law and traditional notions of justice, to know what happened to them, if only to stop them from having to worry about the fate of their loved ones.

These hostages had no recognized status in international law and do not have the protection of any foreign government, since they are Iraqi citizens. Therefore, there has not been any concerted international legal effort on their behalf, although a number of political and humanitarian organizations, including the UN, the International Red Cross and Amnesty International were contacted.⁸ The lack of international concern for these hostages can be contrasted with the successful international campaign for the foreign hostages in Iraq, particularly during the second Gulf War.

³ Ketuly, “Disappeared Iraqi Hostages.”

⁴ David Pratt, “Saddam’s Nemesis,” *Sunday Herald*, August 27, 2006.

⁵ Ketuly, “Disappeared Iraqi Hostages.”

⁶ David Pratt, “The Family at War with Saddam,” *The Scotsman*, January 26, 1994.

⁷ Sam Bartlett, “Sins of Silence, The Big Issue in Scotland,” June 14–20, 2001.

⁸ Ketuly, “Disappeared Iraqi Hostages.”

What little progress has been made is thanks to the Committee for the Release of Hostages and Detainees in Iraq. Several British politicians have agreed to act as mediators between the Committee and the Iraqi Government.⁹ After ignoring requests for information for years, the Iraqi government responded for the first and only time in 1996, when it stated that all hostages had been released in 1986.¹⁰ However, it was known that only 650 hostages had been released at that time, and moreover that at least one of the hostages was released as late as 1993.¹¹ The United Nations could send a human rights special investigation team into Iraq to determine the fate of the remaining hostages.

The Deportations

The order to begin the mass deportations that began on April 4th, 1980 came directly from President Saddam Hussein, in the top secret decree No. 666, signed by him.¹² The government designated certain demographics of Iraqi society (Faily Kurds, Persian, and some Arabs) as being of Iranian origin, in spite of the fact that these people and their ancestors had been born on Iraqi soil. The Ba'ath regime had in fact deported Faily Kurds since as far back as 1971.¹³ The main purpose of this policy was to prepare for an Iraqi invasion into Iran, which started on September 1980.¹⁴

The deportations cast a net around entire families, including the elderly, children, pregnant women, and the handicapped. They came without warning. The families were forced to walk for days during the severe winter across the Iran–Iraq border, without food or water. Some died of exhaustion or starvation, while others were killed by landmines.¹⁵ Once in Iran, many of the deportees managed to apply for asylum in different countries around the globe and leave. The remaining deportees scattered throughout different cities in Iran. Some have been living until now in refugee camps.¹⁶ Meanwhile, civilian detainees who were awaiting deportation were initially detained in al-Fathailyah prison¹⁷ or in prisons in Baghdad, which became over-crowded. The prisons did not provide healthcare or nutritious meals, which negatively affected the infants in particular, while prison guards routinely heaped insults and humiliation upon the detainees.

⁹ Ketuly, “Disappeared Iraqi Hostages”; The Commons Hansard Debates text, Queen’s Speech, November 15, 2006, Vol. 453 (1) UK.

¹⁰ Ketuly, “Disappeared Iraqi Hostages.”

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² *Shafaq News*, “The Curse of ‘666.’”; Hardy, “The Iran-Iraq war”; International Federation for Human Rights, *Iraq: Continuous and Silent Ethnic Cleansing*, 2003, <https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/iq350a.pdf>.

¹³ BBC News, “On This Day. 1971: Iranians Deported from Iraq,” December 30, 1971, http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/december/30/newsid_2547000/2547551.stm.

¹⁴ Ketuly, “Disappeared Iraqi Hostages.”

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

The deportees were trapped in the middle of the eight-year war between Iraq and Iran. Many were killed in Iraqi strikes on Iranian cities. The Iranian government issued deportees with an identity card stating that they were of Iraqi origin.¹⁸

The Hostages

One or more members of most of the families deported was detained. In the first six months after the deportations began in April 1980, an estimated 20,000 people were detained. The majority of them were men between the ages of 16 and 40 (many of whom were military officers or conscripts), although younger boys and a small number of women, girls, and babies were also taken. The pretext was that the detainees were “Iranian citizens living in Iraq.” This was baseless, since all the hostages had been born in Iraq and had Iraqi citizenship papers,¹⁹ and many of them were serving in a military where it was illegal for non-nationals to serve. It is believed that the real reason for these detentions was to deter the deported families from public protest or fighting for the restoration of their citizenship rights and property from the Iraqi state.²⁰

Humanitarian organizations, such as the International Red Cross, as well as the Iranian authorities, state that the number of individuals expelled from Iraq to Iran is close to one million. However, estimates of the total number of hostages are much less certain. The assumption is that approximately one hostage was detained for every ten deportees, which gives a figure of approximately 100,000 hostages. This figure, however, is largely guesswork, but it is based on considerable anecdotal evidence, for, in some cases, as many as twelve hostages were taken from one family.²¹

In view of the dearth of information from the Iraqi authorities, the only figure that can be provided for the number of hostages that remained in detention is around four thousand individuals, but the true figure may be many times this number.²²

The hostage-taking started on April 4th, 1980, in Baghdad, followed by the central and southern areas of Iraq. The families of men not doing military service were initially kept together. After two to four weeks of being held in the Deportation Center in Baghdad, the younger men (and in some cases women) were separated from their families and taken to the General Security Prison, where they were detained for another one to two weeks, before being transferred to the Abu Ghraib Prison. In other parts of the country hostages were transferred to Abu Ghraib directly after a period of detention in a local prison.²³

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.; Pratt, “Saddam’s Nemesis.”

²⁰ *Shafaq News*, “The Curse of ‘666.’”

²¹ Ketuly, “Disappeared Iraqi Hostages.”

²² David Pratt, “If The West Is So Worried About Saddam Hussein’s Human Rights Record, Why Has It Ignored Iraq’s Disappeared?” *Sunday Herald*, May 1, 2003.

²³ Ketuly, “Disappeared Iraqi Hostages”; *Shafaq News*, “The Curse of ‘666’”; Pratt, “Saddam’s Nemesis.”

Detention in Abu Ghraib: April 1980 – December 1984

Hostages were imprisoned in the Heavy Sentence Section of Abu Ghraib Prison from April 1980 onwards. Each block consisted of twenty cells, each cell holding 30 to 35 prisoners. The cell walls were painted black with no windows. Ventilation was by a small vent and each cell had one toilet, but no beds or lockers. The hostages only had the clothes on their backs. Each cell received only one bucket of water per day, which had to serve all 30-35 inmates for drinking, washing, and toilet needs. One bowl of food, of low nutritional value, was delivered to each cell twice a day. Guards also tried to demoralize the hostages by spitting into the food and putting insects or even shoes into it. Visits from relatives or friends were not permitted initially.

The treatment of the hostages varied with the progress of the war. During Iranian advances they were denied food, water, and access to fresh air. As more hostages were brought in from other parts of the country, the cells began to overcrowd such that some detainees had to stand to allow others to lie down.²⁴

The “Riot,” April 30th, 1981²

When Hassan al-Hadad fell seriously ill in Abu Ghraib Prison, the pleas of his fellow hostages that he be taken to the hospital were ignored. He remained where he was without medical attention and finally died on April 30th, 1981.²⁵ This enraged and frightened the other detainees. They broke their cell bars and escaped from their blocks, but not the prison itself. They then roamed the prison, demanding immediate release in view of their innocence. The guards fired on them, turned loose tear gas grenades and water hoses, and cut off the water and electricity supply.²⁶ The “riot” continued until 2 a.m. the following morning, when Barazan Tikriti, the head of Iraqi General Intelligence Service and President Saddam Hussein’s half-brother was called in. He was accompanied by a force of heavily armed men. He listened to the hostages’ grievances, promising to improve their conditions. He stated they would be held while the Iran-Iraq war lasted and would not be deported to join their families. He pledged, “You are all our brothers. You are only being held for security reasons. If the war ends tomorrow, you will all be released tomorrow. If it ends next week, you will be released next week. If it ends next year, you will be released next year. This order comes from the very top.”²⁷ The hostages continued to demand immediate release. They were fired upon again and forced back to their cells. Despite Tekriti’s promises, their conditions were not improved. Instead their rations of food and water were reduced even further, the air vents in the cells were blocked up and fresh air stopped flowing. On the orders of Tikriti, but contrary to his statement to the hostages, on July 14th, the prison authorities said that a list of

²⁴ Ketuly, “Disappeared Iraqi Hostages.”

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

750 detainees were going to be deported.²⁸ These hostages were taken to unknown destinations in groups of thirty to forty. The remaining detainees hypothesized that this group had been selected as the instigators of the “riot.” There is no information as to the fate of this group of hostages.

On September 12th, 1981, conditions changed slightly and hostages who had relatives remaining in Iraq were allowed to receive visits from them. Visits were then allowed monthly and visitors were allowed to bring food, medicine, clothes, bedding, and other necessities. In December 1984, the hostages were transferred from Abu Ghraib to Qalat Al-Salman, which is in the middle of the desert and has no access road.

Qalat Al-Salman Prison: 1984–86

The hostages from Abu Ghraib arrived in three groups, starting on December 5th, 1984. Conditions in Qalat Al-Salman were much better than in Abu Ghraib, and prisoners were not confined in their cells.²⁹ Although hostile at first, presumably because they had told the hostages were Iranian prisoners of war, the guards become much friendlier when they realized that the hostages were Iraqi citizens who had no criminal convictions. Visits from families and friends were again allowed each month and visitors were allowed to bring radios, televisions, and books.³⁰ Unlike Abu Ghraib prison, basic necessities were provided. However, the inaccessible location made visiting difficult.

Limited “Amnesty”

In October 1985, Saddam Hussein announced an amnesty, allowing the release of all hostages with immediate family still residing in Iraq. It was implemented in January 1986. However, rather than being released, hostages were given militia uniforms and taken to unknown destinations in groups of 50 to 100.³¹ This process continued until 1988 when the last group of 200-250 hostages was transferred. At the end of 1988, all contact with hostages still in detention, including visitors and letters from their families, was cut off. The only information available since then has come from the testimonies of ex-hostages and their families. Of the more than 3,000 hostages held in Qalat Al-Salman Prison, only 650 are known to have been released.³²

On July 1st, 2004, the Special Iraqi Tribunal Court read out only seven main charges against Saddam Hussein and his top aides. Arguably, the mass deportation and detention of Iraqis by Hussein was the first, major operation in the Anfal campaign, which has been widely recognized as genocidal. Which begs the question: Then why was this atrocious crime forgotten and dropped from trial of Saddam Hussein? The deportations and detentions were first

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

presented to the Special Iraqi Criminal Tribunal on July 24th, 2004, as Case Number 8, which finally commenced in court on January 26th, 2009.

Conclusion

A number of human rights and other organizations were contacted by the author and the Committee for the Release of Hostages and Detainees in Iraq in an attempt to uncover more information about the fate of these hostages.³³ None of these organizations could provide any answers. Nor could the succession of Iraqi governments since the downfall of Saddam Hussein trace the fate of these hostages, let alone give them back their rights or support the return of the deportees, in spite of passing many resolutions on the matter.

³³ The list includes UN – Human Rights (Mr. Van Der Stoel: Action only can be taken in support of UN Resolutions 688 and 1441, but they have no mandate to enforce), The Red Cross, Amnesty International, International Court of Justice, European Committee on Human Rights, the British government and parliament, the U.S. government and senate, various Arab Governments, and Human Rights Watch.

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