COLLECTIVE MEMORY IN POST-GENOCIDE SOCIETIES: RETHINKING ENDURING TRAUMA AND RESILIENCE IN HALABJA

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Abstract

This article investigates the collective memory that emerged as a result of the chemical attack on Halabja, on March 16, 1988. In light of discussions that deal with memory and reconciliation in post-genocide societies, we look at how collective memory and "postmemory" are formed among the survivors and their descendants. The merit of the article is that it brings together the victim's accounts and creates a bottom-up perspective that challenges the official accounts created by Kurdish and non-Kurdish elites as part of top-down narratives on what happened that day in Halabja and how it should be commemorated. The interviewee narratives illustrate that people of Halabja consider the memory of the chemical attack as an enduring trauma that creates a shared rendering of the past and continues to shape their collective identity. While each generation transfers this collective memory to the next, they also seek justice via shared commemoration practices outside official discourses. In their narratives, reprobation is not directed solely toward the Saddam Hussein regime, but also toward the current rulers of the Kurdistan Region as well.

Keywords: Kurds; Halabja; Iraqi Regime; Genocide; Collective Memory; Justice.

Kurdish political history is full of painful memories and tragedies, genocides and forced migrations, mass graves and bloody battles, and displacements and centuries of combat, combined with suppression of basic rights and desires for self-determination. As Irwani puts it, "over the last century the Kurds of Iraq have been subjected to full-scale discrimination, violence and constant displacement. Attempts to change their situation, either through arms or negotiations have always been defeated by mistrust, and lack of compromise by successive governments, eventually leading to genocide."[1] Since history and memory have a close relationship, the history of Kurdistan appears to be fragmented and diverse, and the collective memories[2] of the Kurds in different parts of Kurdistan are built on the legacies of numerous human rights violations and atrocities by various perpetrators. As von Joeden-Forgey and McGee stated, "The enduring trauma of genocide and of the historical processes of erasure, as well as the trauma associated with the unfinished project of creating a sovereign homeland in which Kurds can find protection, is palpable to anyone who visits

the region."[3] Absence of a nation-state has led to a lack of infrastructure and stability, and thus institutional resources to properly record, document, and archive the occurrence of mass atrocities against the Kurds at least until the fall of Saddam Hussein. In this context, collective memories, orally transmitted generationally in the form of postmemory,[4] became crucial sources of Kurdish political history.

During the Iran–Iraq war, the "Anfal" military campaigns from 1986-88 destroyed more than 3000 Kurdish villages, killing between 150,000-180,000 people and leaving more than 180,000 missing. The campaigns took place in three consecutive phases, the last of which included a chemical attack on the city of Halabja in 1988.[5] Halabja became profoundly emblematic in the collective memory of Kurds and an important memorial site, more so because Iranian soldiers and journalists could document the atrocities by taking photographs, which became part of the commemoration events today. Since the collapse of the Saddam Hussein regime, interest in understanding the legacy of the Anfal campaigns on Kurdish society has grown; however, there are still only a few studies that focus on the impact of past atrocities on survivors and their descendants. Apart from seminal works on Anfal such as Choman Hardi's book on gendered experiences of genocide,[6] Fischer-Tahir wrote about gendered experiences from a masculinities perspective and brought Peshmerga accounts to the fore.[7] Kelly[8] and Hilterman[9] gave an account of the crimes against humanity and international complicity during the Anfal campaigns; Kirmanj and Rafaat analyzed the war from a security and identity lens[10]; and Baser and Toivanen focused on how memorialization of Anfal contributes to the formation of a diasporic identity among exiled Kurds in Europe and beyond.[11] Scholars focused on different aspects with regards to the Halabja genocide specifically. For instance, Leurs has written on the Halabja court hearings and how the victims relived the genocide while giving their testimonies in front of legal authorities.[12] Szanto focused on how Halabja has been memorialized in Kurdish movies,[13] and Rostami[14] focused on the act of remembering through music. M-Hasan wrote about enduring PTSD among Halabja residents,[15] and Moradi et al. focused on survivor accounts with regards to their perceptions of marriage and fears of bearing children with birth defects.[16] Nicole Watt's work focused on the politics of commemoration in Halabja at the local level,[17] Mlodoch laid out the groundwork for a better understanding of victims' discourses and contested memory in post-genocide societies,[18] and Moradi demonstrated the politics of genocide commemoration and its impact on survivors of Anfal.[19] Finally, Six-Hohenbalken[20] and Toivanen and Baser[21] looked at commemoration practices in the diaspora and how the legacy of the genocide is transmitted to the diaspora youth. As important as these works are, we believe that more articles that bring the survivors' and their descendants' voices to the fore are needed to better understand the long-term impact of genocidal events from almost four decades ago.

As Hinan suggests, "Memory plays a crucial role in post-conflict reconstruction, as it aids the establishment of a collective memory, which in turn contributes to the creation of cultural identity, and the establishment of a narrative of truth, both of which are necessary in the rebuilding process."[22] Although in certain cases, collective memory contributes to healing processes after mass atrocities, we assert that this process is not free of politics. The process of reconciliation and coming to terms with the past is shaped by a variety of factors at the elite as well as grassroots levels.[23] Justice and healing, retribution and forgiveness, remembering and forgetting are all part of the collective-memory building process, and each is influenced by political dynamics in a post-conflict society. This article is, therefore, an attempt to contribute to this growing literature on collective memory, with its specific focus on Halabja. By basing its arguments on extensive

fieldwork, including interviews with survivors and their descendants, the article brings an insider and outsider researcher together. The aim is to bring the silent voices of the people of Halabja and their collective memory to the readers' attention. We agree with Hardi that "it is important to question the accepted narrative."[24] Just as she endeavored to make the Anfal women's experiences heard, we wanted to give a platform to the Halabjans who experienced the genocide, directly or indirectly. We concur with Dan Stone's argument that "for the individual victims of genocide, traumatic memories cannot be escaped; for societies, genocide has profound effects that are immediately felt, and that people are exhorted (and willingly choose) never to forget."[25] Although we underline the enduring trauma in survivor's narratives in line with Stone's argument, we also observe their resilience and strength; there is a willingness to heal and move on, but justice needs to be done first and foremost. In this article, we also touch upon how the postmemory takes shape and forms itself in the next generation, and the social frameworks through which memories are transferred to the next generation. To comprehend the nuances of competing memories at the elite and non-elite levels, we also investigate the role played by official organizations and the Kurdistan Regional Government in the formation of collective memory of the people of Halabja. Understanding these dynamics will shed light on the consequences of other traumatic events that Kurds and others have suffered under the hands of the Islamic State in the last ten years. Understanding enduring traumas will help scholars and policymakers to come up with tailored social, political, and economic remedies for past atrocities, if and where possible.

Halabja: The Metonym for Kurdish Genocide[26]

With a population of 70,000 and located close to the Iranian border, Halabja was a strategic Iraqi-Kurdish city. In March 1988, as the Iran–Iraq War was ending, Iranian and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) forces managed to capture the town. On March 16th, 1988, Iraq retaliated with the largest chemical warfare attack since World War I. Iraq's Baʿth Party fighters bombarded the town on March 16th, killing some 5,000 civilians, injuring tens of thousands more, and leaving the rest of the town's population displaced within Iran and the surrounding region. The people of Halabja were subjected to one of the largest gas attacks against civilians in world history.[27] The chemicals included mustard gas, Sarin, and Tabun. These attacks were part of the Anfal campaigns, a larger genocidal campaign mainly against the Kurdish people. It claimed 50,000 to 100,000 lives and destroyed thousands of villages between February and September 1988. The gas attack on Halabja was among the most atrocious attacks during these campaigns. For around five hours, Iraqi MiGs and Mirage aircraft bombarded Halabja with conventional and non-conventional ordnance. The attack immediately killed 5,000 people, while many others suffered injuries and experienced health problems long after. It was reported that more than 75% of the victims were women, the elderly and children. The attacks destroyed residential areas. Many of those who fled were never to return. The legacy of the attack is an increased risk of cancer, miscarriage, infertility, birth defects, and a lingering trauma that is being transmitted from one generation to the next. Even today, water and soil pollution caused by the chemical attack are a big problem in Halabja and surrounding regions.[28]

The Gulf War was a critical juncture for the Kurds in Iraq. The 1991 uprising ("Raparin") collapsed and many Kurds were displaced, creating large refugee waves toward Turkey and beyond. Meanwhile, Kurds received humanitarian, political, and military support from the international community. The establishment of a no-fly zone and Operation Provide Comfort created the opportunity to declare independence from Iraq – at least administratively. The first elections in the

Kurdistan Region (KRI) were held in 1992, and KRI gradually started gaining power, although it was soon riven by civil war between 1994 and 1997 between opposing Kurdish political parties. In 2003, due to the no-fly zone, Kurds were in a strong position to act as allies during the US-led invasion of Iraq. They successfully negotiated for the inclusion of an autonomous region in the 2005 Iraqi constitution, and were able to attract significant economic investment.

However, despite Iraqi Kurdistan's political and economic progress, its scars from the Halabja gas attack were never healed. As Mlodoch states:

> The Anfal Campaign and the use of poison gas had fulfilled the Baʿth regime's aims: the Kurdish resistance was defeated, the Kurdish population frozen in shock and disbelief at the scale of the terror they had experienced and paralyzed by the prospect of seeing another poison gas attack. The Kurds felt forgotten by the world.[29]

Hilterman defines what happened in Halabja as "horrifying events that are known to few, denied by some and exploited for political gains by others."[30]

These words summarize the problems that people in Halabja are still facing today. The very name "Halabja" became synonymous with chemical warfare and the failures of the international community. During the Anfal Campaigns, many Kurds believed that the rest of the world turned a blind eye to the massacres. Indeed, Mlodoch's observations support this view:

> At the time, there was no immediate international response to the poison gas attack on Halabja. The U.S. and West European governments then still stood firmly behind Saddam Hussein in his war against the Iranian Islamic Republic, which was regarded as the greatest danger for the West at the time. The international community remained silent.[31]

Despite a handful of European politicians who are considered "the friends of Kurds" and who constantly raised the issue in their parliaments, such as the French politician Bernard Kouchner, the outside world did nothing to prevent these crimes and, in many cases, still does not acknowledge them for what they were – genocidal acts. Once the main perpetrator, Saddam Hussein, had been deposed, Iraq's High Tribunal and Supreme Court recognized the Anfal campaign as genocide, although Halabja was not one of the crimes for which the late dictator was punished.[32] For many Kurds, the issue has not been resolved and justice has not been done. The Kurds want to see the campaign recognized as genocide across Europe[33] and they demand a transparent and just trial for the perpetrators where the truth about what really happened to them comes to light on the international stage

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) formed the Ministry of Martyrs and Anfal Affairs (MoMA) and committed to implementing social security mechanisms in order to help the survivors and their families. A program called "Rights and Privileges to Families of Martyrs and Genocide Survivors" (RPFMGS) was administered by the ministry.[34] Although the KRG has tried to invest in helping the survivors of the Halabja genocide and simultaneously acquire international recognition for these atrocities, it fell short in satisfying the demands of the survivors who expected more concrete solutions from the KRG for problems they still face today as a result of the attack. In 2006, people of Halabja attacked a memorial that was erected by the KRG in protest of the

government's lack of care for survivors.[35] As official commemoration ceremonies continue annually, Halabjans are still remembering the atrocities with their ramifications on everyday life. The gap between survivors' expectations and the ruling elites' capabilities or willingness to respond to local demands, in the end causes tensions and creates a fragmented collective memory that is trapped between top-down and bottom-up remembering practices.

Methodology

This article adapts a qualitative research methodology and bases its findings on extensive fieldwork in Halabja, where semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants who have a direct and indirect memory of the tragedy. The key questions revolved around the factors that influenced their choice between remembering and forgetting certain legacies of the genocide. Moreover, they were asked to talk about how they created a narrative surrounding their direct and indirect experience of the genocide and how they have framed it within a human rights perspective. We aimed at unpacking issues related to power relations, collective silence, and amnesia, as well as markers of remembering practices that are adapted by the majority of the interviewees. In other words, we tried to understand who remembers and then scrutinized the questions of how and why remembering occurs and in what ways these memorialization practices are transmitted to the next generation.

For the sake of this study, 22 (12 male and 10 female) interviews were conducted with two distinct groups of participants. The first group consisted of 11 participants who had direct memory of the tragedy of Halabja genocide. The second group consisted of 11 participants who had indirect memories (post-genocide generation). The interviews were conducted in Kurdish, between 2013 and 2014, in Halabja. The first author is from Halabja himself and possesses the insider researcher's knowledge and access points to the community under scrutiny. The second researcher has been working on genocide recognition and commemoration for the last ten years. The article combined insider and outsider researchers' experiences and knowledge on the issue. The interviewees were carefully selected. The names are kept anonymous to respect interviewees' privacy. The article also benefited from secondary resources, including existing documents related to the genocide and its aftermath. The authors also visited the Halabja memorial, and information was gathered from documentation centers, archives, photos, CD and video recordings, online material, books, magazines, newspapers, and other sorts of documentation related to Halabja.

Collective Memory and the Halabja Genocide

Recent studies have shown that when one studies post-conflict societies and transitional justice, the discourse usually centers upon a common understanding of the importance of truth-seeking and reparations or criminal justice.[36] In recent years, there has been a rise in interest in the notions of collective memory and commemorative practices as valuable opportunities to understand the forces and tensions at play within a given society, and also as powerful tools for reconciliation and transitional justice.[37] Especially in societies which experienced a collective trauma such as genocide, commemoration spaces and practices become even more important.[38] As Carranza Ko has asserted, construction of a collective memory and then, consequently, memory revisions constitute a form of symbolic reparations in post-conflict societies, and they are part of a larger arena of transitional justice efforts. According to Ko, the discourse on memory and transitional justice in general centers on two main debates: a) what constitutes collective memory and b) the political struggle that accompanies that memory.[39] Quoting Schwartz[40] (2000), Ko

draws our attention to the development of knowledge about past atrocities and how they are not independent from interpretations. In this regard, scholars and practitioners have asked important questions: "What role does memory play in the framing of contemporary debates in our society? What memories do we seek to preserve and how? How can we limit the manipulation of public memory by political actors for their own interests?"[41] Some of these still need to be answered by systematic studies on post-genocide societies.

The instrumentalization of collective memory by elites shows us that remembering past atrocities can be a slippery phenomenon when it comes to privileging the interests of ruling elites.[42] Researchers in memory studies have demonstrated how narratives of collective memory can be instrumentalized by powerful elites or resisted from the margins, with these tensions often playing out in the physical spaces of formal memorials and monuments or in the very creation of collective memories that define the cultural identity of a society. The question of who remembers and how and what is included in the official narratives has made collective memory formation a contested political topic. As Selimovic demonstrates "the process involves a multitude of communities and agents of remembrance with different aims that hold varying degrees of transformative agency and aims, for example, civil society associations, international donors and 'ordinary' individuals with a need to mourn."[43] In this paper, we show that this is particularly pertinent to the case of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The genocide has been recognized by the Iraqi High Tribunal and a number of European parliaments,[44] and it is a crucial part of the narrative of the Kurdish struggle for self-determination. These elite-led commemorative practices have been fiercely contested at the local level; although they also support independence, locals in Halabja, for instance, have physically attacked a monument erected by their rulers.[45] Our interviewee accounts show that survivors and the post-genocide generations have developed a variety of alternative commemorative practices that challenge the elite narratives concerning the genocide and the political developments surrounding that specific period.

Understanding how Halabjans form their collective memories at the local level is important for scholars and practitioners for a variety of reasons. First, it affects the threat perception within a society which directly or indirectly experienced atrocities in the past. The way they remember affects their reconciliation attitudes toward a variety of actors at intra- and inter-group levels. Secondly, as the Yezidi Genocide by ISIS[46] has shown, the threat against minority communities in the region persists. How can a community heal under the shadow of future threats to its existence? Thirdly, one can observe that the process of absorbing a traumatic past atrocity into a community's collective memory can turn into a complex matter as constant negotiations take place between those who retell and recall a certain event. In Williams's words, "In post-genocide societies political actors will sometimes choose to render memory of the past black and white, emphasizing the guilt of some, the victimhood of others, and establishing the heroism of a select few. This is particularly likely when it serves to legitimize these political actors in the post-genocide order or to delegitimize adversaries."[47] The case of Anfal in general is an excellent example in confirming Williams' statement: The Kurdish authorities built their nation-building projects over the legacy of mass atrocities and Kurdish suffering in order to show the world that Kurds need self-rule in order to prevent future attacks. A discourse on martyrs and victims who lost their lives for the nation served to create a rallying-around-the flag effect, which confirms Selimovic's observations: "historically, the dominant figure in commemoration is male, often a soldier, who is glorified in patriotic renderings of the men and boys who gave their lives for noble

struggles."[48] In case of Halabja, we need to understand that the survivors and those who indirectly received collective trauma have formed their own ways of dealing with what happened during and after the chemical bombings. While commemoration efforts and top-down collective memory narratives mostly focus on the "martyrs" and those who lost their lives, one should also understand the enduring political, social, and economic implications of the trauma on those who were left behind. The survivors still question why the attacks happened in a given space and time, and they question whether an actual healing process took place physically and psychologically while they experience enduring grief.

The "WHY" Question: Inquiring into the Motivations of the Perpetrators and the Lack of Saviors?

Our interviews revealed that Halabjans assess Halabja's chemical bombardment as a tragedy, a disaster, and a crime against humanity. They call this event a genocide, which has left a lump in their throat and a bitter collective memory. They used concepts such as *oppression* and *victimhood* when they talked about abstract emotions. In terms of visual realities that are ingrained in their memory, they referred to *hundreds of lifeless bodies on the ground, torn, blackened, martyr, weeping and moaning, 5,000 martyr, 1,000 wounded, missing, horrific images, blind, all chemically infected, mothers leaving their children, and son leaving his aging father, 15-hour walking, hungry, etc.* These words showed us that the collective memory of what happened in Halabja was associated with vivid images of what happened to their loved ones and the physical brutality of the massacre left a mark in their conceptualization of trauma. An interviewee explained his feelings thusly:

> *It was about 11:30 am, a lot of people had gathered near Halabja City management, which by firing a missile at them several people died there. The first attack hit our house. In this attack, which hit three houses simultaneously, nearly 25 people died. Then we went to the basement. The basement was ruined due to another rocket hit on our heads. My brother and nephew were killed, I was there. But the roof over our heads broke in a way that, only my head stayed out and I did not choke. Later they brought me out, so I survived. . . . After 12 days we moved, with about 20 children, all below 10 years, with a truck from Ababeili, to the village of Anab, toward the Iranian border, I saw hundreds of bodies fallen to the ground. Blackened bodies, without heads, cut in half. It was really terrible and painful.*

Another respondent refers to Halabja as part of the community's collective memory:

> *It was a collective memory. Since 5,000 were martyrs, everyone remembered it. I remember everything. Since it was a childhood memory and childhood memories are different from other memories. And because we have 5,000 martyrs, it became a history and memory of all the people. The result of the interviews indicated that a mass murder or a genocide has happened. As the act has been deliberately for the destruction and elimination of a group of people. Innocent people who did not have a weapon for defense, nor had found a way to escape, except for their mother's fabric sleeves to be torn and watered by them to cover their mouths and keep them shut to avoid being choked by chemical gas.*

Various interviewees had a hard time understanding why Halabja was chosen for such inhumane mass violence, and they had doubts about what really happened behind the scenes. Their narratives

questioned the official historical accounts and pointed out inconsistencies in the official narrative on the course of events. Our findings were in line with Hardi's claims that "the inability of the Kurdish revolution to protect civilians during the Anfal caused disappointment and anger." She refers to cases where commanders prevented people from leaving their villages when the threat was near, and an attack was imminent. It is believed that they hoped if the civilians stayed, such a mass atrocity would not take place in front of the international community.[49] One interviewee, for instance, recounts that, three days before chemical attack, he had seen Iranian soldiers and Kurdish Peshmerga forces entering the city. He questioned the presence of Iranian soldiers in the city, indicating that an attack was forthcoming, yet Halabjans were not warned about what was about to come. Most of the respondents asked why chemical bombardment was chosen as a method by the regime and why Halabja was chosen for the attack. An interviewee, who is a journalist, shared his doubts with us:

> *I still wonder why this happened. Some say it is Iran's fault, but Iran controlled other cities as well, or took Faw. Some say it was because of the Peshmerga. And some say it is because the people of the city are Islamic, but Marxism grew up in Halabja. Saddam discriminated against the Arabs, and for that reason he was unjust.*

While official accounts stopped questioning the reasons behind the attack, locals still have questions. Some also question why Kurdish political parties carried the frontline of the battle to Halabja specifically and why Iran got involved in this process.

> *The basement, where we entered, had two doors. Two Iranian soldiers were standing in front of each door. Both sprayed a substance to the door seams, to avoid chemical effect. And it did really work. Apart from my sister, who had probably been chemically affected outside the basement, no one was hurt.*

Another participant shares the questions tormenting around his mind:

> *I have many unanswered questions. Why did this crime happen to us? Why didn't some Kurdish forces let us get out? Why chemical bombardment? Some even say that Halabja was a laboratory for testing chemical weapons in.*

Another interviewee asks:

> *Who was the culprit? Iran was one of the agents and Kurdish forces, or the other one. And even the people of Halabja were another factor, because thy celebrated with enthusiasm the Iranian forces, and this provoked more hatred in Saddam.*

Other respondents asked how this crime could have taken place in front of world powers, and no one said anything. The lack of international response still upsets the Halabjans and reinforces the sense of being decimated victims who are on their own in the struggle for justice.

From a Patchwork of Individual Memories to Collective Memory

Many interviewees reflected on how they also transmit their collective memory to the next generations. We ascertained that the narratives are usually told and retold at social gatherings

among the family and kinship circles, as well as through education and media outlets. Commemoration events during the anniversaries of past atrocities as well as social gatherings in cafés (chaxana)[50] also constituted venues for memory transmission. By the act of "narrating," the people of Halabja emphasize that this memory belongs to them as an unforgettable event, with enduring impacts on the social frameworks they construct in interacting with each other. By doing this, they make a link between individual and collective memories and constantly recreate and shape what is remembered and how.

As a result of interviews conducted in this study, it can be said that there is a significant difference in the range of memories being retold, as well as their transformation through formal institutions like schools and universities and informal familial circles. Some interviewees remarked that, in the camps set up by the UN in Iran, every time they got together – at night in tents and during the day in the markets and in the mosques, at relatives' gatherings and with friends – they would remember and review their memories, narrating the events that happened to them. As a result they created a patchwork of experiences which slowly but surely lead to a local narrative surrounding this traumatic event. For instance, one interviewee recounted:

> *I do not know why I iterate, what I know is that, yes, we always talk of chemical bombardment, and whenever we see each other or whenever one of the family members came to visit me, we have discussed and exchanged memories. Especially when I see families of close relatives, I retell to my children more.*

Another interviewee who was then 10 years old, says:

> *It is necessary for the next generations to know it, as their history. For the present generation not to take the freedom for granted. . . Halabja citizens are not mentally stable. They have a kind of depression and are kind of bad-tempered. As long as Halabja has been a town, there have been mental and psychological victims.*

Schools in particular were effective in transferring memories to the third generation, namely by schoolteachers with a personal motivation and sense of duty. Most of these teachers either had the direct memory of the crime and retold it for the students, or had heard about it from other people of Halabja. Teachers recognize the act of transferring the memories to children as a personal, moral, humanitarian, religious, and national duty.

Politics of Commemoration: Who Has the Right to Remember?

Barsalou and Baxter suggest that memorialization helps repairing societies that are emerging from violent conflict.[51] The jury is out, however, on whether memorialization crystallizes a sense of victimization, suffering, and even revenge, or whether it helps the post-conflict societies to recover while honoring those who suffered. In Halabja, memorialization caused tensions at different levels as survivors and their descendants still agonize about the past and push for further reforms and justice from their rulers and from international courts to punish the perpetrators. Current official ceremonies were perceived as spectacles for international media with little to offer to locals with respect to their quest for healing and justice.

The interviewees revealed that the commemoration events sponsored by government institutions, or related education curriculum, described the history differently than how they would. As Moradi mentions, although days of remembrance open up further space for memory surrounding those events, the narrative belongs to the KRG's Anfal Ministry rather than the survivors themselves.[52] For instance, some interviewees confessed that they do not participate in official commemoration ceremonies organized by the government because they believe the elites instrumentalized the Halabja chemical attack to attract public attention, improve their position in elections, and garner support from human rights organizations and the international community. In other words, the Kurdish elites intended to use "victim diplomacy"[53] at home and abroad via diaspora organizations[54] to gain support for self-determination. They perceive the role of commemoration and associated media negatively, and that holding these events serves only to make them feel more pain and does not benefit the survivors or future generations. In other words, they resent the conversion of their hometown into a dark tourism space, where people not emotionally connected to their pain come and treat their memory as a tourist attraction. A female interviewee says:

> *When they bring foreigners, they hang a lot of white cloth and posters all over the city walls and roads to avoid them seeing the city itself... We did not get any good from this city and its anniversaries. I do not profit even one dinar.*

A second-generation school counsellor who has no direct recollection of the Halabja crime admits,

> *These catastrophes are mostly discussed during the anniversaries of the catastrophe. And the media reflects on it to get the attention of the Western media.*

In their eyes, ruling parties have taken advantage of the tragedy of Halabja to appeal to the international community and promote the Kurdish right for self-determination. To do this, they have tried bringing foreign dignitaries to the Kurdistan Region and then to Halabja to attend the ceremonies marking the anniversary of the attack. Two days before the March 16, 1988, amongst these programs, victims of the Halabja bombardment were interviewed. Many of them suggested that although this international attention translated into media exposure of Halabjan narratives, it did not serve the purpose of healing. According to some interviewees, competition and rivalries among the ruling parties spilled over to discussions on Halabja. Moreover, the media spotlight revived the memory of the tragedy, refreshing wounds and making those who had lost loved ones burst into tears. Although some of the interviewees were highly skeptical about the intentions of such ceremonies, they still actively participated in them.

Our findings are in line with Hardi's previous work on Anfal women. She claimed that the painful memories of Anfal were instrumentalized for election purposes with an intention to remind people what happened to them under non-Kurdish rule in the past.[55] An interviewee reflects on this issue:

> *It is true that it has become a symbol, but when it only has a functional aspect. It's organized for the leaders and officials of other countries who visit during the anniversaries of Halabja, which is held every year, and there is no benefit for the people, so what's it good for? In spite of the glory and sanctity of the place, it has turned into a code for begging, and it's used for partisan and personal interests.*

The interviewee, who was born four years after the genocide notes that:

> *The government remembers this tragedy in just two days. There was no such thing as a Halabja crime even in the curriculum. We are very different from Hiroshima, we are very different from the Holocaust. Israel brings the tragedy of the Holocaust to the minds of all members of society.*

Williams accounts that "in countries that have experienced war, atrocity or genocide, it is common for various different and competing memories about the past to co-exist, propagated by different actors or at different points of time."[56] Halabjans' own narratives show a fragmented collective memory surrounding the legacy of the genocide and friction between top-down and bottom-up memory construction, which should be reconciled in order to ease the healing process for Halabjans. Otherwise, as Moradi observed, post-genocide memories are subjected to differing translations by various actors, sometimes at cross-purposes, and the official narrative tends to appropriate such memory from the ones affected the most: the survivors.[57]

The Justice that Never Arrived

One of the main themes that arose from the interview data was that the survivors and victims' families were still seeking justice for what happened. Halabjans talk about the cruelty and oppression they have faced. The persistent sense that "justice has not arrived" make them feel obliged to pass their pain and resilience to the next generations. As one interviewee said, "the next generation must know who the oppressor was, what an injustice has happened to them."

The issue of missing people was still a dominant topic to discuss among the interviewees. It is true that some of the missing children from the Halabja tragedy, such as as Zimnako,[58] have returned to their families, but there are still about 119 missing children whose families are waiting for them to return. After 33 years, 119 Halabja children are still missing, and their mothers are waiting for their return every day.[59] One interviewee testified:

> *Last year, they found one of the missing children, Ali (Zamnako), who had been raised by an Iranian family. And after 25 years of coming home, every time my mother sees these things or even sees a movie on TV in which someone has been forgotten, she gets hot again because she says maybe my father is still alive and suffering right now. Forgotten. Maybe he will come back too.*
>
> *For me, the picture and the painting of Halabja are not finished yet. It is not over because my mother has not yet accepted a dinar of the family inheritance left to her by her father because she believes that her father is not dead. The memory is still alive for my mother and so is it for us.*

Interviewees speak of their experience by underlining that their grievances continue as the days pass. This confirms the assertion that post-genocide experiences are, after all, a part of the Halabjan story as a whole, which goes beyond mourning for lives lost.[60] Residents of this city, who have been often displaced, did not receive any compensation. Only a few hundred families who have been called first-class martyrs were given land or a house, after several years of struggle. The interviewees were asked whether they managed to forget and move on; none could give an

affirmative answer to the question. A journalist who belongs to the post-genocide generation points out:

> *The memories I have are primarily oral. They are just audios. My mementos are oral and like a ripped movie or like a picture in my mind; but it's not over yet. . . I really can draw the events like a chart for you. . . for me the picture and image of Halabja is not over yet. . . . I've heard my memories from my mother, my grandmother and my mother's uncle.*

There are frequent protests in Halabja over the lack of basic utilities and compensation for material and moral damages. This has caused people to sometimes lose their patience, such as in 2006, when protesters burnt Halabja's Monument, to draw international media attention to the plight of the people of Halabja. They believe all the money spent on the monument could have been put to more judicious use as funds for service projects to the city. Each Halabja family's home has been razed several times. A generation of young people, aged between six and sixteen years at the time of the chemical attack, have been deprived from education because of the disaster, and now they suffer from mental and physical problems, with infertility issues and scarce sources of income. For instance, an interviewee recalled:

> *One of my older sisters was deprived of education because of this tragedy and she could not continue her education in Iran because our situation was very bad. And this is an injustice that has been done to us. All these other injustices and ruins that still remain in the city, and the situation in Halabja, which if it were not for this catastrophe, would be a different situation now. All this pain and illness was all due to the chemicals that were poured on Halabja. My mother had eye problems and she suffered from it every day.*

The genocide not only cost lives, but it also stole from the future of the survivors. It still has serious ramifications for the townspeople today:

> *When we see a young person from another city in our country, who has an elegant car and lives on welfare, we remember all the memories. That if the tragedy of Halabja hadn't happened, the unemployment rate in the city would have been much lower, that many young people who were children at the time of the disaster, have been deprived of education because of it. If this had not happened, they could have received college degrees by now, and most probably would have been employed somewhere. How will these people's wounds heal?*

There are still around 500 Halabjans suffering from long-term injuries such as respiratory and eye-sight problems. Their voices are silenced except for a few media exposés.[61] About 10,000 people were injured in the crime and many of them became disabled or lost a limb. One of the interviewees has lost his gallbladder, another one 30 percent of his lungs, and another his eyes. The man who lost his gallbladder asked, “Who should compensate for 12 years of stomach pain of one of the interviewees who has 8 children?” Those who have reached middle age now ask, “Who should compensate them for their childhood memories? If the town had not been chemically bombarded, the cityscapes, city architecture, city roads, houses, and even weather, would have been different.”

Conclusion

Dan Stone has argued that "genocide is less amenable to willed oblivion than most events because of the deep wounds it creates; thus, in the memory politics that surround it, genocide can scar societies long before and long after its actual occurrence."[62] Our fieldwork in Halabja substantiates this statement. Each interview revealed deep wounds, still unhealed. The silenced voices of Halabjans are waiting to be heard after almost four decades since the genocide. They claim that their memory narration has not been written in books, nor incorporated into history or other education programs in schools. On the other hand, they want to tell their children that the people of Halabja were victims of mass atrocities and were targeted because they were Kurds. They want the next generation to understand the injustice done to the people of Halabja, and the Kurds more generally, over the centuries. The people of Halabja believe they are victims, yet despite this, they transmit their stories of resilience and survival to the next generations. They are determined to keep the memory of their injustices alive, through acts of remembrance, through sharing stories, and through determination never to forget. They have suffered from silence; not only theirs but also the silence of others who still do not pursue justice in international tribunals. They have not been relieved yet.

We observed that unanswered questions still haunt them and impel them to turn enduring grief into collective identity. They asked, why did this catastrophe happen to us? Saddam was the main culprit, but were there others? Who was involved? Why did Saddam gas only Halabja? Aren't Iranians guilty, because of entering to the city? Has Saddam and his regime's claim been valid that, he did this because the Iranians were in Halabja? Why did some forces block civilians from leaving, when they knew the day before that an attack as coming? What is the role of Kurdish forces here? The holes in their understanding breed resentment against an official discourse that retells their stories without their input or license. History will tell if the strength of bottom-up, collective memory formation will eventually outlast and overcome the limitations of the top-down official remembrance.

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