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Hussein's Slaughter of Kurds Marked in Museum Photos, Vignettes

Review by Michael Luongo - September 28, 2009 16:00 EDT



Halabja Policemen

Sept. 29 (Bloomberg) -- The photographs commemorate atrocity, depicting men and women clinging to babies and bundles of clothes as they flee Iraq along the rugged trails of the Zagros Mountains into Iran.



The mayor of Halabja, Fuad Salih Raza

The visual record I found at the Halabja Memorial in Kurdish Iraq bears witness to the events of March 16, 1988, when **Saddam Hussein** unleashed a genocidal chemical attack of sarin, mustard and other gases on the town. It was part of Anfal, the Iraqi president's campaign against the Kurdish rebellion that arose during the Iran-Iraq War. As many as 180,000 Kurds were killed.

My guide Mahmud Mahmud, 44, a victim of the 1988 assault, led me through a room filled with massacre vignettes using mannequins and based on the photos.



A cemetery in Halabja

"My father died in the attacks," he said.

From the roof of the museum, curved beams rise 100 feet to encircle a globe, like hands at prayer, offering a vivid signpost to this grim tourist site in a region of intense natural beauty.



Halabja Memorial

The Halabja area also made headlines in late July when three U.S. hikers, Joshua Fattal, Sarah Shourd and Shane Bauer, were arrested nearby, across the border in Iran. U.S. Muslim groups met with Iranian President **Mahmoud Ahmadinejad** last week, according to the Associated Press, to urge their release.

A small city of only 70,000 people, Halabja has been significant as a progressive Kurdish cultural center. Its

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Mahmud Mahmud

history boasts a Mideast rarity, a female mayor named Adilla Khanim, who took over in 1909 when her husband died. Under Ottoman rule, the city was a center of political resistance that continued into the modern era.

'The Only One'

Mahmud introduced me to other guides, each with a story to tell. Akram Mohammed, who created a vignette showing a pickup truck with dead bodies spilling from it, pointed to a small child in a gallery photo.

"That's me," he said. "I am the only one in the truck who survived."

Hersh Mohammed Yunis, 5 at the time of the attack, talked about being rescued by Iranian journalists who took the photographs. The attack left him with a deformed, reddened right eye.

The main room of the memorial is strikingly beautiful. Its ceiling is draped with red, green and white bunting -- the colors of the Kurdish flag -- that is reflected in the highly polished black granite walls where the names of more than 4,000 dead are engraved. Almost 5,000 died, yet not all could be identified and many remain in mass graves.

'No One Believed'

"Every day, we are sad to explain this," Mahmud said. "When we were tortured under Saddam, we were shouting about the genocide and no one believed us. Today, we want you to see this and take this story to your people."

The room is full of symbolism: 19 meters and 88 centimeters high, for the year of the attack; a circular black granite platform in the middle of the room is 3 meters wide, for March, with 16 pink granite lines flowing from it to represent the date.

The polished-stone elegance of the room is broken by a kitschy electronic billboard with slogans linking Hussein's attack on Halabja to the U.S. attack on Hiroshima during World War II. While the U.S. probably supplied some of the chemicals for the attack, it is the only anti-American sentiment I have ever seen in Kurdistan.

The museum opened in 2003, a project of [Jalal Talabani](#), the current president of Iraq, and a founder of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. It was to symbolize Kurdish unity while focusing on Hussein's repression. On March 16, 2006, during an anniversary celebration, locals who felt politicians were exploiting history and ignoring the victims, set fire to the memorial, which was later rebuilt. The incident may be the reason why, Mahmud said, the memorial employs men like himself as guides.

Moving On

Some locals however, want to move on from Halabja's past. I met Mayor Fuad Salih Raza, a slick, handsome man who told me, "We want to start a new life and turn a new page."

With neatly manicured hands, he passed me a tourism proposal put together by the German company [IC Group Inc.](#)

"We are insisting on renovating and rehabilitating the infrastructure of the city, so we removed the destroyed things from this disaster," he told me as I scanned the book's descriptions of potential hotel sites and natural water landmarks, like the Ahmed Awa waterfalls near the Iranian border.

I reminded the mayor that the waterfalls are where the three Americans disappeared and let him know I was headed there after our meeting. A look of grave concern crossed his face. He calls the Halabja police department and ordered armed guards to come with me. The last thing he wanted was another missing American.

Police Escorts

A half-hour drive away, Ahmed Awa was a refreshing relief from Halabja's heat. On the cool, leafy trails, Sari Khalid and Ismael Mohammed, my police escorts, were more concerned about my slipping on the muddy, moss-filled walkways than my blundering into Iran. Now and then they grabbed my hand or prodded my shoulder to balance me, their Kalashnikovs dangling at their sides.

We found a few quiet seats, after the sound of rushing water that overwhelms the trails, at a cliffside teahouse. Families played in the water, an incongruous mix with some in bathing suits, others in traditional clothes, the men in turbans.

The detained Americans were the topic of conversation when a border guard, Shakawan Qaidar, came to greet me.

"I am not supposed to tell people what to do, and I can't approach everyone who looks like a foreigner," he said to me.

'Danger, Danger'

Still, Qaidar said he worries about lost visitors, remarking how easy it is to accidentally walk across the border on the mountain ridges overhead. Foreigners should register with local police before hiking in the area, he said.

"How do you tell foreigners who don't speak Kurdish to avoid the border?" I asked.

He laughed and made the sign of a head being chopped off, saying, "Danger, danger," in English, but then he became serious

The Iranian military built patrol roads up to the mountain crests where they intercept intruders immediately, Qaidar said. A Westerner would be a special prize

As a journalist, I usually verify what people tell me, but I took Qaidar's word for it, asked for another cup of sugary tea and continued to enjoy the cool watery view before making the descent down the mountain.

([Michael Luongo](#) is a travel writer for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are his own.)

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