

## End of Al Majid 'Chemical' Ali

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### Summary

The execution of Chemical Ali might enliven the debate on chemical warfare. It should inspire the global community to revisit the threat from chemical weapons and renew cooperation to ensure chemical agents remain inaccessible to the non state actors like the al Qaeda and the Taliban. These militant groups are irresponsible and are forever looking for ways and means to induce maximum damage to innocent lives across the globe.

International focus was repositioned back to Iraq as Saddam Hussein's cousin Ali Hassan al-Majid was sentenced and eventually hanged to death in Baghdad on January 25, 2010. Commonly known as 'Chemical Ali', Majid was implicated in atrocious war crimes and had been sentenced to death on four occasions since 2007. He bore a striking resemblance to the former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. Majid Ali is also referred as the 'butcher of the Kurds' in some places due to his pivotal role in the genocide against the Kurd ethnic group.

Majid was serving as the head of the southern region in March 2003 when US launched the military offensive in Iraq. In April of the same year he was reported killed in an air strike according to British authorities. Even as US Defence Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld admitted Ali's status was unknown, he was captured alive by US forces a couple of month later. His name figured at the fifth place in the US most wanted list amongst the former Iraqi officials. His capture was celebrated equally by the soldiers of the CENTCOM and the Iraqis.

Majid's political career took off as the governor of the Northern Province in March 1987. Ali was also the head of the Northern Bureau of Saddam's Baath Party. In this capacity he went on to sign a decree on June 3, 1987 which ordered indiscriminate killing of Kurds by employing chemical weapons. With the invasion of Kuwait, Majid changed his position in the North and became the governor of the occupied territory which the Iraqi state referred as 'Iraq's nineteenth governorate.' Later on he went to take up the offices of the Minister of Interior and served a four year stint as the Minister of Defence. He was an important figure within the Baath Party being a member of the Ruling Revolution Command Council and the leader of the party in Salah-al-Din governorate.

Majid Ali exercised influence even within the family of Saddam Hussein. His nephews were married to Saddam's daughters. When they revolted against Saddam Hussein, Majid Ali being a trusted henchman of Saddam ordered the execution of the nephews with their father who incidentally was his real brother. This incident

known as the 'Jihadi offensive' underlines his loyalty to Saddam Hussein. Majid shifted back to the strategically important Kuwait border in 1998, a location held by him during the 2003 US offensive.

Majid or Chemical Ali was sentenced to death for four offences. In 2007, he was given a death penalty for formulating and executing the Anfal campaign; in 2008 for crushing the Shia movement in the wake of the 1991 Gulf War ; in March 2009 for Shia killings in Sadr district in Baghdad and finally in 2010 for the Halabja massacre. Two other officials from the Baath Party were also sentenced in the Halabja case. The Kurds in Iraq and the Iranians had a valid reason to celebrate the execution of Majid Ali. He was behind one of the most heinous act committed against humanity- the 'al Anfal campaign' or the genocide against Kurds during the days of Iran-Iraq war in 1988.

Chemical Ali was the principal architect and executor of the al Anfal campaign launched largely against the Kurd population in Iraq. The ethnic cleansing of directed against Kurds was envisaged by the Iraqi government as a counter insurgency to deal with guerrilla fighters. The Iraqi government meant to punish the Kurds for aligning with the enemy, Iran. The al Anfal campaign or "the Spoils" was designed to eliminate the Kurds; mainly men aged between 15-70 to avert the possibility of their becoming guerilla fighters against the Iraqi state as stated - "It is apparent that a principal purpose of Anfal was to exterminate all adult males of military service age captured in rural Iraqi Kurdistan"<sup>1</sup> where chemical weapons were used extensively.

The campaign was launched in February 1988 when the Iraqi forces marched towards the headquarters of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) at Sergalou- Bergalou, headed by the current president of Iraq, Jalal Talabani. Halabja located about 150 miles from Baghdad was captured by Kurdish forces with alleged help from the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. It was an attempt from the Kurdish forces to reclaim the headquarters seized by the Iraqi forces. As a result, the town of Halabja was attacked in March 1988. At least 5000 people

died in Halabja when several aircrafts released poisonous mustard gas- a blister agent and nerve agents such as sarin, tabun and VX. Clouds in white, black and yellow surrounded the town. Only few could manage to escape the effect by putting wet cloth to cover their faces. Survivors say at the first instant, the poisonous gas smelt of a sweet apple.

The use of chemical weapons had an indelible impact on the targeted population in Halabja, most of whom were women and children- some died instantly while others developed fatal diseases. There were respiratory and visual complications amongst the survivors. The surroundings were badly affected and so were the water supply and the animals. The incident forced majority of the Kurds to flee the area in search of safe destinations. Later the Iraqi forces cleared the area by dumping dead bodies in mass graves and conducted survey of the area to assess the impact of the chemical weapons.

Iraq's chemical weapon programme dates back to the 1980's- much before the Operation Desert Storm in 1991 launched by US against Iraq's occupation of Kuwait. During the 1980's, Iraq played a regional ally to US in its quest against Iran. International dynamics underwent a complete change in the beginning of the 1990's and former allies became enemies in the Gulf War.

Ironically, the international community, especially the United States, did not do much apart from blaming Iran for the Halabja massacre. Thousands of innocent lives lost in the attack failed to persuade US and Britain to review its ties with Iraq and take strong measures against the Iraqi state. It was only during the ensuing years that the US and its allies realized Iraq's WMD stockpiles posed a blatant threat to global security. In fact, the moral ground to attack the tyrannical regime in Iraq was a lot more meaningful in the aftermath of the Halabja attack than in 2003. During the UNSCOM operations in Iraq after 1991, some labs were traced where chemical weapons could have been produced during the Saddam regime. Later the Iraq Survey Group (ISG) noted in its final report that there is no evidence to support that Iraq has engaged in production

of chemical weapons after 1991. In February 2009, Iraq became a member of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) after setting up the National Monitoring Directorate.

The execution of Chemical Ali is a grim reminder of the threat from chemical weapons. The perpetrator is dead but the idea and the means are still available. The end of Chemical Ali might enliven the debate on chemical warfare. It should also inspire the global community to revisit the threat from chemical weapons and renew cooperation to ensure that chemical agents remain inaccessible to the non state actors like the al Qaeda and the Taliban. These militant groups are irresponsible and are forever looking for ways and means to induce maximum damage to innocent lives across the globe.

#### Endnotes:

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