

## ROUND TABLE

TELEVISUAL AND CINEMATIC NARRATIVES OF THE  
MIDDLE EASTMourning Halabja on Screen: Or Reading Kurdish Politics  
through Anfal Films

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*Towards the end of the decade long Iran–Iraq war, Saddam Hussein launched a deadly attack against the Kurds, known as the Anfal Campaign, killing more than a hundred thousand. One of the largest acts of genocide occurred on 18 March 1988 in the Kurdish city of Halabja. On that day, sweet-smelling poison gas was poured over the city, killing at least five thousand. Since 2001 Kurdish moviemakers have memorialized the tragedy of the Halabja massacre by producing cinematic dramas and narrative documentaries. These films are part of a discourse of authenticity and a politics of culture that permeate the Kurdish independence movement. This essay proposes that Halabja films can be divided into three stages: the era of consolidation, 2000 to 2009; the golden era, 2009 to early 2014; and the fall which followed the fall of Mosul to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. Each era reveals new attitudes towards politics, society, and the massacre.*

**Keywords:** Kurds, Anfal, Halabja, Kurdish films, genocide, Kurdish cinema

**W**e define ourselves through stories. A central story for Iraqi Kurds is the trauma of the genocidal Anfal Campaign, which Saddam Hussein waged against the Kurds in Iraqi Kurdistan in the 1980s. What is equally important to the content of a story, however, is the way in which it is narrated. In their varied narrative strategies, Kurdish films that invoke the chemical attacks during this campaign not only reveal collective loss and suffering along with nationalist aspirations, but also the changing attitudes Kurds possess toward themselves, their past, their government, and their hopes for the future.

From 1987 to 1988 Saddam Hussein carried out deadly attacks, known as the Anfal Campaign, against the Kurdish population of northern Iraq, killing more than a hundred thousand people. The largest single instance

of genocide occurred on 16 March 1988, in the town of Halabja. On that day, poison gas was poured over the city, killing at least 5,000 people.<sup>1</sup> Kurdish filmmakers have memorialized this tragedy by producing both dramas and narrative documentaries that contribute to a process of nation-building. The films reveal political aspirations, but also conceal social ills and political divisions, and are both shaped by and inform discourses of authenticity and a politics of culture that permeate the Kurdish independence movement.

This essay proposes that there have been three stages in the development of Kurdish films that reference Halabja. The first stage began following the civil war that erupted between the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) after the United States guaranteed Kurdish autonomy via a no-fly zone in 1991. During that period, Kurdish films simply called attention to the plight of the Kurds. The second stage consisted of the affluent golden years that lasted from 2010 to 2014. Films during this era praised the government as the guarantor of Kurdish prosperity and community. After the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014, the Kurdish *rentier* state declined economically and politically, and the third stage characterized by cynical attitudes towards the state and even Kurdish culture commenced.

This essay draws on Hayden White's notion that historical narratives can be divided into four categories, that is romance, tragedy, comedy, and satire,<sup>2</sup> as well as Elisabeth Robin Anker's insight that contemporary politics often employs melodramatic terms in order to analyze these three historical stages.<sup>3</sup> Halabja films of the first era fall into the category of romance, not because they tell a love story, but because they contain an emphasis on self-identification and on heroes who ultimately triumph over evil. In the melodramatic films of the second era, the forces of good not only prevail over evil, but must also suffer in order to become morally purified. The films of the third era portray change as meaningless and heroes as government by folly and thus can be categorized as satire.

<sup>1</sup> David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 3rd edition (London: IB Tauris, 2007), 358–59.

<sup>2</sup> Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

<sup>3</sup> Elisabeth Anker, "Villains, Victims and Heroes: Melodrama, Media, and September 11," *Journal of Communication* 55, no. 1 (March 2005): 22–37.

## Halabja in the post-Civil War Era and the American War (1997 – 2009)

The 1990s were turbulent years, so there were few Iraqi Kurdish films made during that decade. Following the peace deal between the PUK and KDP in 1996, Iraqi Kurdistan began to recover very slowly. The first important film produced in this era that dealt with the theme of Halabja was *Jiyan*, or “Life.”<sup>4</sup> Released in 2001 and entirely in Kurdish, it emphasizes victimhood. It is a straightforward story set in the early 1990s that seeks to draw attention to the tragedy of Halabja. Despite the catastrophic backdrop, it fits Hayden White’s category of romance, because Kurds and Kurdish culture ultimately prevail.

The title character a ten-year-old girl, Jiyan, likes to play on a swing on the outskirts of Halabja. Diyari, a Kurdish-American whose name means “gift,” drives up in his pick-up truck and introduces himself to Jiyan, but she doesn’t answer. He drives into town and asks men at a teashop for directions to the house of his local contact, Kak Salar, but they won’t help. They see him as an outsider despite his Kurdish roots. Finally, a twelve-year-old boy, Sherko, is willing to show him. With Kak Salar’s help, Diyari rents a room and begins the project he came to do: build an orphanage in Halabja.

Most of the people Diyari meets over the course of the film have been hurt either directly or indirectly by the chemical attacks. Yet throughout the film, a few warm-hearted scenes evoke sympathetic laughter. While the construction of the orphanage is progressing, people die and are buried, and young couples fall in love. Halabja is portrayed as a melancholic, bittersweet small-town idyll. The flute plays, the sun sets, and life continues, even though the audience is constantly reminded of the legacy of horror.

At the end of the film, the orphanage is ready. With a huge ceremony that honors Diyari, a local official reminds everyone that: “The Kurds have many enemies and only few friends. The world does not care about Halabja and ignores it. Yet, we believe in life, love, and progress. Long live martyred Halabja! Long live Kurdistan!”<sup>5</sup> The film is a romance. Its warm-hearted love is directed first at Kurdistan, the land, and then its suffering people, their resilience and traditions. Romance also permeates personal relationships, but most importantly emerges in the communal message that the gassing of Halabja was not the only instance of genocide and that all Iraqi Kurds are united by their shared suffering.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> *Jiyan*, directed by Jano Rosebani (Erbil, Iraq; Evini Films, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, at 85:50 to 87:00 min. The English text is cited from the subtitles.

<sup>6</sup> Diyari is finally embraced by the community after a scene in which he witnesses a crowd suffering from the effects of a chemical attack and then relates his own recurring visions of the aftermath of Saddam’s attacks on Qaladze when he was a child.

The recurring themes in this film include the Kurdish people's relationship to music, nature, family, and communal ties. All of these are metonyms that represent Kurdistan as a whole. They represent an organic unity, moral purity, and an innocent tradition. Music is portrayed not only as a way to deal with trauma, but also as a carrier of authentic culture. In other words, the healing process is something that is generated from within. The Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and its political parties are entirely absent. The only time the audience is introduced to an official is near the end, when the orphanage is inaugurated. The absence of any sign of a Kurdish government indicates a lack of Kurdish political and institutional agency. The implication is that Kurds are passive and barely able to address their own suffering. The over-filled hospital unable to meet the needs of its patients symbolizes Kurdish helplessness and victimhood. Without external help, such as the help of Diyari who brings in money from outside the region, the residents of Halabja are unable on their own to build orphanages for their children and unable to counter the effects of the chemical attacks.

*Jiyan* represents the first period, the period of consolidation, which began after the end of the Kurdish Civil War and lasted until 2009. During this time Kurds aimed to publicize their struggle in hopes of achieving international recognition. Fittingly, *Jiyan*—both the girl and the movie—reach out to Diyari, the returnee who represents the wider world, as well as a global audience. The period of consolidation was a time of hope. Thus it is fitting that *Jiyan* was narrated as a romance, despite the fact that it reflected on a tragedy.<sup>7</sup>

### **Halabja in the Golden Years (2009 – 2014)**

The period between 2009 and the rise of ISIS in 2014 constitutes the “golden era,” during which the KRG enjoyed rapid financial growth and supported films that made the state look appealing. Two films embody this periodization and both deal with children who disappeared in the aftermath of the chemical attacks on Halabja. Iranian families adopted many of these children, because they were presumed to be orphans and when some later discovered this they set out to find their biological families. The KRG funded and publicized DNA tests, helping to reunite these children with their families. Though the stories

<sup>7</sup> The famous Iranian Kurdish film director Bahman Ghobadi has produced a number of films that reference Anfal. While he is interested in promoting awareness of the plight of Kurds, he remains an independent filmmaker who is not heavily influenced by KRG politics. His films, even later ones, exemplify the period of consolidation. He highlights suffering, ignores feuding Kurdish political parties, and romanticizes Kurdish culture symbolized by music. *Marooned in Iraq* (2002) and *Half Moon* (2006) exemplify this trend.

once again deal with Anfal and its effects, the true hero of these stories is the KRG.

Both films are inspired by the true story of Zimnako Mohammad Ahmed. An Iranian family in Mashhad had adopted Zimnako after Iranian soldiers found him in the rubble of Halabja. His birth parents were assumed to be dead. His adoptive mother died when he graduated from secondary school, after which while grieving, he is told by family members that he had been adopted. In search of his roots, he took off to Iraqi Kurdistan, where the KRG conducted a DNA test and found a match.

The first film that captured these events was the documentary *Halabja: The Lost Children*, released in 2011.<sup>8</sup> It tells the story of Zimnako and of Fakhredin, who founded the Missing Children of Halabja Foundation after losing his own children during the Anfal. Like *Jiyan*, the film portrays an idyllic Halabja with scenes from the bazaar, teahouses, young children and old men, and quiet sunsets. In contrast to *Jiyan*, however, the town is now depicted as prosperous; here are fully stocked shops and shiny new cars in the streets. This is no longer the Halabja of the mid-90s.

Fakhredin is an artist and a teacher at the school his missing children attended before 1988. While he continues to wait for his missing children, he creates commemorative mosaics, carves faces of victims in wood, and chisels them out of stones. One of his wooden carvings of the word “Ba‘th” has the shape of a Swastika, implicitly equating Anfal with the Holocaust. Over and over in these artistic pieces, he insists that Halabja was innocent and that Saddam unjustly destroyed the city and its inhabitants. Fakhredin explains that he founded the Missing Children of Halabja Foundation hoping to find his own children. “I’ve put our three missing children on the list of the missing. I’ve done everything to find them. I’ve knocked on many doors. I even went to President Mam Jalal [Talabani], who told me to start a club, which I did. Also, we now have a Minister who travels to Iran to find our children.”<sup>9</sup> A lengthy interview with Chinar Sadullah, the former minister of the Kurdish Martyr and Anfal Ministry, allows the KRG to play a crucial role in the film. The Minister explains that she continues to work on the problem of the missing children. When she heard about Zimnako, she contacted five families who claimed they had lost a son around Zimnako’s age. In her interview she comments that the families fought over Zimnako. Sadullah’s depiction echoes the story of King Solomon, who had to act as a judge when two women fought over an infant, each claiming it as her own. Cast in the role of King

<sup>8</sup> *Halabja: The Lost Children*, directed by Akram Hideou (Berlin: Artistik Film, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, at 47:00 to 48:00 min.

Solomon, Sadullah details how she conducted a DNA test to resolve the issue scientifically and rationally.

The climax of the film occurs when Zimnako and his potential relatives discover the identity of Zimnako's biological family. First, the Minister gives a speech highlighting her own efforts. When the doctor announces the DNA results, everyone cries. Some are sad Zimnako did not turn out to be their lost loved one. Others are glad he found his family. After mother and son hug for the first time in decades, the mother thanks his adoptive family for raising him. Zimnako adds: "I'm glad to meet my real mother... I now have two mothers. I'm sure my adoptive mother would be happy for me too."<sup>10</sup> Unlike Fakhredin, Zimnako doesn't focus on suffering. He explains that he was treated well and that he suffered less than others because he was too young to realize what was going on.

The 2013 Iranian feature film *Burning Nests* retells Zimnako's story as a fictionalized coming of age journey.<sup>11</sup> After depicting scenes from the attack, viewers see a young man on a bus travelling to Iraqi Kurdistan. He revisits memories of how when his mother died, he found out from an uncle that he was adopted. Desiring to find his roots, he sets off to Halabja with an acquaintance, who was also affected by Anfal and who functions as a guide. The guide helps Zimnako meet families that have lost children during Anfal and to have a DNA test done. Crucially, Zimnako visits the Halabja memorial, where he is deeply moved by the inscribed names of the 5,000 people who died in there. Songs by the classical Kurdish singer Hassan Cireke play in the background. Looking at wax corpses in the museum, then at the pictures taken by journalists right after the massacre, Zimnako weeps.

In the post-2009 films, the Halabja memorial is a central heterotopia where the horror of Anfal is frozen and time stands still. According to Foucault, a heterotopia is a place that stands in contradistinction to normal space, as in cemeteries and museums.<sup>12</sup> The Halabja memorial combines both: it is a museum and, by listing the names of the dead, it functions as a cemetery. The memorial portrays the massacre to its visitors as powerful, but uncomplicated. For example, none of the movies mention the controversial 2006 destruction of the Halabja memorial. *The New York Times* initially reported that the individuals who attacked the monument were upset that the KRG built an expensive memorial while ignoring the needs of the people

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, at 65:00 to 65:30 min.

<sup>11</sup> *Burning Nests*, directed by Shahram Maslakhi (Tehran: unknown, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces (1967)," trans. Jay Miskowicz, [http://www.opa-a2a.org/dissensus/wp-content/uploads/2008/03/foucault\\_michel\\_des\\_spaces\\_autres.pdf](http://www.opa-a2a.org/dissensus/wp-content/uploads/2008/03/foucault_michel_des_spaces_autres.pdf), accessed 1 August 2017.

in the area.<sup>13</sup> Rejecting this interpretation, Qubad Talabany, the son of the then Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, wrote a letter to the editor implying the saboteurs were Ba‘thists.<sup>14</sup>

In *Burned Nest*, Zimnako is greatly moved by the memorial and from that moment he begins to fully identify with Halabja. That evening the guide takes Zimnako to a nice hotel in Sulaimani, the provincial capital, which represents urban wealth and sophistication in contrast to rural and agrarian Halabja. Zimnako learns that a DNA match has been found, but the guide tells him he will have to wait for the public ceremony two days away. Zimnako feels tortured by the wait. Finally, two days later, a Minister and a doctor announce the results at a televised ceremony. In other words, Zimnako has to wait for the state to stage a performance. During the ceremony, a poet first recites verses on butterflies and the children of Halabja. When the Minister ascends the podium, she announces that he is the son of Fatima Mohammad Salih, an elderly woman in the back, who stands up and cries as she hears the news. Others in the audience also publicly mourn.

In the films of the “golden era” the KRG stands as the virtuous hero that saves the Kurds. Unlike films of the first era, it is not music and culture that saves the Kurds and restores them to normalcy, although the community is still portrayed as organic, warm-hearted, and passive. Multiple families desire to claim the lost children, but cannot resolve their loss alone. The KRG, the hero that has been purified through the collective suffering of the Kurds, must intervene. Moreover, the orphan returnees are the ones who now need help as they come back from exile to become a part of the community. Zimnako differs from Diyari in that he is coming *for* and not *to* help. The relations of power have shifted.

The scene in *Jiyan* where Diyari comes face to face with the horror of the long-term consequences of Anfal in the hospital is echoed in the scenes in *Burning Nests* when Zimnako visits the Halabja memorial. However, there are also fundamental differences. In *Burning Nests*, Zimnako sees only pictures of the dead and the wounded. He and the audience are removed from the direct horror of Anfal. The memorial presents a sanitized version of the suffering that Diyari witnessed in the hospital. Moreover, whereas the people Diyari encountered in the hospital continue to be part of Kurdish society, requiring attention and care, the ill and disabled victims are missing from

<sup>13</sup> Robert F. Worthmarch, “Kurds Destroy Monument in Rage at Leadership,” *New York Times*, 17 March 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/17/world/middleeast/kurds-destroy-monument-in-rage-at-leadership.html>, accessed 1 August 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Qubad Talabany, “Violence in Halabja,” *New York Times*, 23 March 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/23/opinion/violence-in-halabja-907030.html>, accessed 27 June 2017.

the later films and are no longer portrayed as part of the story. The memorial and the emphasis on the cemetery and the list of names of casualties imply that the victims are all dead. Those who are not dead, such as Zimnako, are young people who need nothing more than a brief heroic intervention by the government in order to find their families. Unlike earlier disabled and injured Anfal survivors, the missing children are handsome, healthy, and can contribute to society. They are heroes to be admired, not injured and disabled elderly to be pitied. There is an aesthetic dimension here as well. The memorial is clean, modern, and has symbolic value. The hospital is neither clean, nor modern. The blind, mutilated, and burned bodies of the victims at Diyari's hospital are disturbing to look at. The grotesque and horrifying images are unmitigated and immediate. They stand in stark contrast to the artistic and politically sensitive symbolism of the memorial. Thus, the horror of Anfal has been removed and replaced by poetry and art in the "golden era" films. A regal celebration of the KRG substitutes for the former period's emphasis on the grotesqueness and needy passivity of mutilated bodies.

### **Halabja after the Fall (2015 – 2017)**

The third period of Halabja films begins after ISIS defeated the Iraqi army in Mosul in 2014. At first the KRG received moral, military, and financial support from Europe and North America in their fight against ISIS. However, an economic crisis soon spread, eventually leading to political turmoil in 2017. With the dwindling of resources, given the decline of oil prices, war expenses, and waves of refugees and internally displaced persons, the "golden age" came to an end. The KRG had previously employed much of the work force but was now unable to pay salaries regularly. Widespread accusations of corruption, nepotism, and divestment by elites further engendered disillusionment among the general populace. Consequently, the KRG was no longer regarded as a virtuous hero and savior. In 2013 after finishing his first eight-year term, Massoud Barzani was granted a two-year extension of his tenure as President of Kurdistan, but it had already become clear that Barzani wanted to remain in power for longer.<sup>15</sup> Cynicism became prevalent and is also palpable in the films *Memories on Stone* and *16/03*, which represent this era.<sup>16</sup> While the first is more artistic and the second has the characteristics of a thriller, both are humorous, self-reflective, and critical.

<sup>15</sup> He was the unelected President of Kurdistan until November 2017.

<sup>16</sup> *Memories on Stone*, directed by Shawkat Amin Korkiv (Berlin: Mitosfilm, 2015); *16/03*, directed by Danny Darren (London: Baiboon Film Entertainment, 2017).



*Memories on Stone*, released in 2015, was a German-sponsored production. It depicts the difficulties the protagonist, Hussein, must overcome in his quest to produce a film about Anfal. Despite the tragic past, the effects of which remain visible, the film boasts an abundance of comic relief and absurdist humor. The film's prologue depicts "young Hussein visiting his projectionist father during a screening of 'Yol.' Soldiers storm the theater saying the film is forbidden, beating Hussein's father in tandem with the violence glimpsed on the screen below."<sup>17</sup> In the present, Hussein is now the director and his friend Alan the producer of a film about the Kurdish genocide. Everything is a challenge and misfortune of all kinds befalls those involved in the film's making. The producer is plagued by personal, political, and financial problems. Alan and Hussein have trouble finding a location site and casting a female lead. When they finally find a woman, Sinur, she battles with her own memories of a father killed by Ba'ath soldiers and an uncle who forces her to marry her cousin if she wants to appear on screen. When Hussein's film is finally completed all local officials are invited to the first screening to be held at Saddam's prison in Duhok. As soon as the film begins to play, however, the electricity suddenly cuts out. When they are finally able to set up noisy generators, it begins to rain and most of the audience leaves.

The most recent Halabja movie, *16/03*, was released in March 2017. The subtitle reads: "politics is worse than terrorism," and this is the message. It is an action-cum-thriller film with a dark and cynical view of politics. Independence, given government corruption and the cynical attitude that prevails in much of Kurdistan, is no longer seen as the solution to all problems. *16/03* refers to the date of the chemical attacks on Halabja. The story, however, only utilizes Halabja as a reference point. The drama itself focuses on Aryan, a Kurd from Halabja living in the UK who is being framed for a massacre on a film set, where ironically a documentary about the Arab Spring was being shot. At the end of the film, viewers discover that the crew has been smuggling drugs and weapons into the Middle East.

For much of the film, Aryan is in prison where he learns English while attempting to discover who framed him and why. His pregnant American girlfriend constantly restates her devotion and love in the few scenes they are shown together. To the police investigators, she recounts Aryan's childhood in Halabja and what happened during Anfal. Aryan himself constantly remembers Halabja by carrying around and smelling apples. His father had

<sup>17</sup> Jay Weissberg, "Film Review: Memories on Stone," *Variety*, 25 October 2014, <http://variety.com/2015/film/festivals/film-review-memories-on-stone-1201447051/>, accessed 27 June 2017.

fought against the Iraqi army as a Peshmerga and Aryan was sent to his relatives in Sulaimani when the chemical attacks killed his entire family. How he can experience flashbacks of the attack without actually having been there to witness it is left to the audience to figure out. Layer after layer of corruption and deceit are revealed over time, and at the end viewers finally realize that the investigator himself is a top ranking Mafia lord whose operatives include the director of the film set, David, an assassin from the initial documentary film set, and even refugees in camps in Iraqi Kurdistan. David is depicted as a stereotypical Jew: he is evil, cunning, and motivated by monetary gain. The refugees are also portrayed stereotypically: they are Arabs willing to kill Kurds. Aryan's name is also symbolic and suggests that he is not an Arab, not a Semite. Most importantly, he insists that he is peaceful. In one scene, he reminisces that his uncle became upset with him when he shot a rabbit.

The Halabja films produced after “the fall” are satirical. They don't make fun of Halabja, but of contemporary Kurds and how they deal with the memory of Halabja. In *Memories on Stone* the humor is intentional. In *16/03* it is not. However, since *16/03* is such a terrible film, given the constant clichés, non-sequiturs, unclear storyline, pathetic dialogue, appalling performance of the cast, and the incongruent message, viewers may interpret it as a satire of the appropriations of Kurdish history common in Kurdish political discourse. The absurdist humor in *Memories on Stone* and the surrealist farce in *16/03* are complemented by an emphasis on kitsch and cultural symbols. While earlier films portrayed actors in Kurdish clothing, it is only in these later films that material culture becomes a distinct subject. While *Missing Children* from the “golden era” aestheticizes Anfal through art, in “the fall” period films art is turned upside down. In *Memories on Stone* the Halabja film within the film ultimately attracts only very few attendees once it screens. In *16/03* the symbolism of Halabja is reduced to cartoonish prison art and a reoccurring green apple. What is meant to be authentic high art in *Missing Children* becomes kitsch after “the fall.”

The absurdity showcased in films produced in the third era extends to notions of society, culture, and government. While Kurdish society is portrayed as organic and supportive in the first two eras, it is ridiculed in *Memories on Stone* and entirely absent in *16/03*. In *Memories on Stone*, society is portrayed as rigid. The female lead is trapped by familial expectations. In *16/03* the fact that Aryan impregnates his girlfriend and takes her to Kurdistan without marrying her is telling. Aryan tells his girlfriend about his family, but he never introduces her to his wider family and friends. When she comes to Kurdistan, he shows her touristy spots like the Citadel of Erbil

and the Halabja memorial, objectified and aestheticized symbols of culture and history.

The government, which played such a central role during the “golden era,” is practically absent after “the gall.” It is marginalized in *Memories on Stone* and in *16/03* it is equated with terrorism. As noted above, Aryan clearly states while he is imprisoned that “politics is worse than terrorism,” which implies that he does not value any form of government, Kurdish or otherwise. Yet Aryan loves Kurdistan. The film ensures that the audience knows he is patriotic, however, he is critical of governments, which he sees as inherently corrupt. In both films the KRG is no longer the hero that saves Kurds and heals their wounds.

### Heroes and Villains

The films of the first and, to some extent, the second era represent romances in White’s sense as the hero, whether it is Diyari or Zimnako and the KRG, ultimately prevails. The films of the second era possess melodramatic elements. Fakhredin’s art, for example, demonstrates how undeserved pain has refined Kurdish art. The films of the third era, however, no longer fit the category of romance. Instead, they are satires wherein the hero remains imprisoned in a corrupt world. Neither the filmmaker Hussein nor the actress Sinur truly achieves success. Hussein’s film is a flop and Sinur stays married to her cousin. Even Aryan, despite his eventual escape from prison, remains captive in a violent and immoral world.

In each of the three eras, the hero straddles the line of being insider and an outsider. He is someone who belongs but has left and then finally returns. As part insider, the hero shares the moral purity of suffering victims. Leaving the region empowers the hero to fight the forces of evil or to at least mitigate the turmoil left behind by evil deeds. Diyari is a diasporic Kurd, which implies access to education and to funds ultimately enabling him to return and build an orphanage. In *Memories on Stone*, Hussein must first leave Kurdistan and then return before he can direct a film on Halabja. In the films of the “Golden Era,” the KRG is cast as the morally pure hero because it emerges from the Kurdish people, who are *a priori* virtuous. Concurrently, government officials are also outsiders because they stand apart from the rural, simple people of Halabja. They are an educated and wealthy elite, many of whom have studied abroad.

The Ba‘th represent the forces of evil because they inflict undeserved pain and suffering upon the morally upright denizens of Halabja. The films persistently portray the attack on Halabja as entirely unprovoked. No historical context that might provide a motive for the genocide is provided

in any of the films. This lack only enhances the malevolence attributed to the Ba'ath.

## Conclusion

Since the 1990s, the tragedy of Halabja becomes a trope in varied cinematic portraits that convey different messages across distinct periods. The first period, the “Era of Consolidation” that lasts until 2009, was an era of relative poverty and need. During that time, cinema productions used Halabja to draw attention to the plight of the Kurds, romanticize Kurdish culture, and to arouse pity. Pity was seemingly thought of as the means to attain international recognition. The second period cast the KRG as the main hero, and showcased the organization as an agent capable of acting as the healer of social ills and wounds caused by Saddam. Perhaps most significantly, it could find lost children and reunite them with their families. The physically deformed bodies of Anfal survivors were no longer shown. Instead, they were replaced by aestheticized memorials praised as high art. The third period encapsulates a time of decline, economic crisis, and political dissonance. The films released in this stage have been satirical and absurdist about the present, though they continue to be reverential about a now iconic past.

The periodization of Halabja films has allowed this essay not only to analyze diachronic changes in the representations of Kurdish society, history, and political developments, but also to examine how these changes reveal more about the era during which a particular film was produced than about the actual 16 March 1988 Halabja genocide. Kurdish society is idealized during the first two stages, but portrayed as rigid and morally exhausted by the third era. Kurds remain victims, whether of Saddam, political and economic crises, or their own notions of honor. Their victimhood hinders them from acting and rising above tribal views of honor, and by the third stage, from forming a democratic government. Halabja as a metonym morphs from continued suffering to a tragic memory that is curable through memorialization, and finally transformed into a distant relic that has lost its relevance. The future, which held out the promise of progress in the first two eras, has turned bleak. By the last era, the dream of an independent Kurdistan has become marred by strife, corruption, and rampant uncertainty.