



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

Hannah Arendt, Ba‘thism, and *Anfal*

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Abstract

In the twentieth century, totalitarianism emerged as a new phenomenon, with powerful new regimes sweeping to power on the backs of the ideologies of National Socialism, Bolshevism, and Ba‘thism. Armed with these ideologies, and in their names, such regimes committed murder at a mass scale previously unknown to world history. Among the victims of this historical process were the Kurds in Iraq, who were subjected to genocide at the hands of the Ba‘thist regime. This article addresses the relationship between totalitarianism and genocide, and specifically how the Ba‘thist regime justified genocide against the Kurds. It argues that three elements in Hannah Arendt’s theory of totalitarianism – ideology, terror, and total domination – explain why every totalitarian regime in history has wound up resorting to genocidal programs. Using the 1980s *Anfal* campaign by the Ba‘thist regime against the Kurds as a case study, this article elucidates the relationship between totalitarianism and genocide. This analysis will lead to a better understanding of the justifications, features, and motivations of the Ba‘thist regime’s genocide against Kurds.

Keywords: Totalitarianism; Genocide; Hannah Arendt; Ba‘thism; and *Anfal*

After World War I, colonial Britain and France divided the former Ottoman Empire into protectorates. As a result, some groups, such as the Kurds, were split up and riven across the new borders, while others such as Shi‘i and Sunni Muslims and Assyrians were forced to live together within them. After the war, Kurdistan was carved up among the four post-colonial states of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Deprived of distinct national rights in these new polities, Kurds lived as oppressed minorities, a people made stateless by colonial diktat.

Iraq, which did not exist before World War I, melded together ethnic and religious groups that were as diverse as they were historical, including



Arabs, Kurds, Assyrians, Chaldeans, and Muslims (both Shi‘i and Sunnites), Yazidis, Christians, Sabians, and Jews. Britain had to govern this comingling of different peoples and ways of life in one country, where conflicts and revolt against their mandate often flared up. From the beginning, Kurds disagreed with the annexation of Southern Kurdistan (the Ottoman administrative *vilayet* of Mosul) to Iraq and revolted against the British forces. The British responded with brutality. Winston Churchill, acting as secretary of state for war at the time, defended the use of poison gases against the Kurdish rebels: “I am strongly in favour of using poisoned gas against uncivilised tribes [i.e., the Kurds]. . . [It] would spread a lively terror.”¹

Chemical attacks against Kurdish people by British forces in the 1920s set the tone for Iraq’s disquieting politics toward the Kurds later on. R.M. Douglas proposes “a connection across the decades between Churchill and ‘Chemical Ali’ (Ali Hassan al- Majid).” In same manner, Liam Anderson and Gareth Stansfield suggest, “Perhaps the extensive British use of chemical weapons against rebellious Kurdish tribes during the 1920s provided the model for the *Anfal* campaign.”²

Building a nation-state in plural societies perforce, as Britain had done in Iraq, often results in the replacement of that very pluralism with the conditions for “domestic genocide.” That is just the scenario that played out during the “*Anfal* campaign,” a series of military actions taken by Ba‘thist Iraq to Arabize the Kurdish parts of the country and eradicate Kurdish political power. Since a nation-state requires a unified national identity, the pursuit of this goal in a highly plural, diverse society such as Iraq may entail the use of force, including forced assimilation and the physical eradication of minorities, cultures, and languages. As Kurdish dissident thinker Abdullah Öcalan says, “The nation-state in its original form aimed at the monopolization of all social processes. Diversity and plurality had to be fought, an approach that led into assimilation and genocide.”³

The *Anfal* Campaign

In her theory of totalitarianism, Hannah Arendt observes three elements, namely, ideology, terror, and total domination, to explain the relationship between totalitarianism and genocide. Following Arendt’s footsteps, this article argues that Ba‘th ideology, terror, and domination led inevitably to the horrors of the *Anfal* campaign in Iraq.

1. Ideology

In 1968, the Ba‘th Party took over Iraq in a military coup after a first, short-lived attempt at political control in 1963. The second coup, however, was not

¹ R.M. Douglas, “Did Britain Use Chemical Weapons in Mandatory Iraq?,” *The Journal of Modern History* 81.4 (2009): 861.

² *Ibid.*, 864-65.

³ Abdullah Öcalan, *Democratic Confederalism* (London: Transmedia Publishing Ltd, 2011), 12.

only a change of regime, but the means to a profound change of Iraqi political organization, economy, and social order.⁴ The Ba‘th Party trumpeted pan-Arabism, as embodied in its famous phrase: “One Arab Nation with an Immortal Mission.” Pan-Arabism was crucial for the Ba‘th regime because of its requirements for the establishment of a single Arab state. As Devlin claims, the Ba‘th became the first Arab political party with aims of reifying pan-Arabism. Concretely, the Ba‘th movement wanted to unify all Arabs under one state.⁵ Necessarily, it opposed ethnic pluralism; and consequently sought to abolish all forms of it. It needed three prerequisites for realizing its ethnocentric vision: First, a political institution (the Ba‘th Party); second, an ideology (Ba‘thism), which provided justification for murder; and, third, terror, as a device for the literal eradication of pluralistic elements, such as the Kurds, that did not conform to the idea of a purely Arab superstate.

By the late 1970s, to be an Iraqi citizen was to be a Ba‘th party member. For Ba‘th, the state was only an instrument to reach its party goals, which included the Ba‘thification of not only Iraqi society, but also of the entire Arab world. As Saddam Hussein said, “it should be our ambition to make all Iraqis in this country Ba‘thists in membership and belief” and “we aspire to make all our people in the Arab homeland Ba‘thists.”⁶ Therefore, a united Arab Ba‘thist nation is the full realization of Ba‘thism. “The Ba‘thi nation is based on faith not race. Faith in the ‘eternal message’ of pan-Arabism leading to faith in the party is the key to realizing the uncorrupted Arab nation.” According to the Ba‘thist ideology:

The quality of being an Arab is resting on faith in the message of Arabism. The moment one begins to “believe in the future of the Arabs and struggle for the Arab nation” a metamorphosis into Arab-hood takes place. In fact, the onus is on the Kurd to deny his or her Kurdishness.⁷

The reality of this program can be assessed by analyzing the Kurdish *jash* phenomenon: a *Jash* was a Kurd who denied his/her Kurdishness (the equivalent term in Arabic is *fursan*, used to designate a Ba‘th government collaborator); s/he believed in Arabism and struggled for the Arab nation. In this way, faith in the ethnic idea of Arabism was to Ba‘thism what race was to Nazism.

The Ba‘th Party’s idea of faith (*iman*) and blind loyalty to “Arabism” is explicitly derived from the Islamic tradition. Faith and mythmaking are part and parcel of the Ba‘thist ideology. The Ba‘thist myths derived from Islamic and Arab traditions. For the Ba‘thist ideologue Michel Aflaq, “nationalism is

⁴ Denise Natali, *The Kurds and the State: Evolving National Identity in Iraq, Turkey, and Iran* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2005).

⁵ John F. Devlin, “The Baath Party: Rise and Metamorphosis,” *The American Historical Review* 96.5 (1991).

⁶ Saddam Hussein, *Social and Foreign Affairs in Iraq* (London: Routledge Revivals, 1979), 56.

⁷ Kanan Makiya, *The Republic of Fear: Politics of Modern Iraq* (London: University of California Press, 1989), 134, 142.

love before everything else. . . . He who loves does not ask for reasons” since “faith precedes all knowledge.” Nationalism carries the “Arab spirit.”⁸ Such an idea, according to him, cannot be imported from the West; but it lies in the Arab and Islamic traditions. For the Ba‘thist ideology, Islam represents the total unity of the Arabs, and it is a significant part of Arab nationality, language, and literature. In Aflaq’s view, Arabism is a body “whose spirit is Islam.” Since “Islam was an Arab movement, its meaning was Arab renewal and its perfection. So the language that Islam descended with was Arabic. The outlook and understanding was that of an Arab mind.”⁹ According to Ba‘thist ideology, Islam as a revolutionary Arab movement renewed via Arabism. Consequently, Islam emerged as an enormous formation of an “eternal” Arabism.¹⁰

In Ba‘thist ideology, Islam could play a major role to regulate different ethnic groups and minorities in one Arab state. Ba‘thists claim that whoever speaks Arabic and lives on Arab territory is an Arab. Sati’ al-Husri, a pan-Arab ideologue, believed that a nation is a group of people, who speak the same language; thus anyone who speaks Arabic is an Arab. For Ba‘thists, Iraq is part of the Arab homeland and Iraqi people are part of the Arab nation. The Party used specific myths to reject Kurdish ethnicity and identity. As the Ba‘th constitution stated, only Arabism could exist in the Arab state; all other ethnic groups (including Kurds) must be assimilated and melted in “one crucible of the Arab nation.” As a result, a non-Arab group must be expelled from the Arab homeland if they could not be assimilated.¹¹

From this it follows that the Ba‘th Party, with its pan-Arab ideology, viewed Kurdish nationalism as a threat to Iraq and the pan-Arab unification project.¹² Thus, for Ba‘thists, Kurdish support for another party was unacceptable – such would exclude them from the Ba‘thist definition of the Arab people. “The people” and “the Arab nation” were understood as one and the same, a set of collective nouns with identical meanings. Thus under the Ba‘thist ideology, Kurds were represented as a potential threat, an obstacle to Arab unity, untrue to “the people.”¹³ The Kurds, accordingly, were a danger to be annihilated.

Every totalitarian system needs internal and external threats upon which to base its ideology and policies. For instance, in the Third Reich, the enemy was defined in racial terms (Jewish threat), whereas in Stalin’s regime the enemy was defined in “class” terms (bourgeois threat). Likewise, in the Ba‘th regime the enemy was defined in terms of “national” (Kurdish threat). All totalitarian

⁸ Michel Aflaq, *Fi Sabil al-Ba‘ath*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dar al-Taliah, 1959) 133.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 145.

¹⁰ Makiya, *The Republic of Fear*.

¹¹ Denise Natali, “The Kurds and the State” *National Identities* 23.2 (2020); Sherko Kirmanj and Aram Rifaat, “The Kurdish genocide in Iraq: the Security-Anfal and the Identity-Anfal,” *National Identities* 23.2 (2020).

¹² Ofra Bengio, *The Kurds of Iraq: Building a State Within a State* (London: Lynne Rienner Publisher, 2012).

¹³ Makiya, *The Republic of Fear*.

regimes in history have used the same tool of pseudo-ideological justifications for the deprivation of entire groups' right to live.¹⁴

There is a link between radically evil principles and radically evil acts. Since principles come first in a political movement, they are expressed in ideologies, and then acted upon. Ideologies become a basic structure for genocide. As a result, ideological principles can guide genocide. Although not every ideology has principles that justify methodical genocide, ideological principles have been used to justify every case of genocide in modern history.¹⁵

II. Terror

Terror is a necessary ingredient of a totalitarian regime, because the totalitarian state ratiocinates on an ideology instead of an interest. Arendt argues that totalitarian motivation is an ideology of natural and historical laws, rather than interests and desires for power.¹⁶

An ideology is quite literally what its name indicates: it is the logic of an idea. Its subject matter is history, to which the 'idea' is applied. . . . The ideology treats the course of events as though it followed the same 'law' as the logical exposition of its 'idea.' Ideologies pretend to know the mysteries of the whole historical process – the secrets of the past, the intricacies of the present, the uncertainties of the future – because of the logic inherent in their respective ideas. . . . Ideologies always assume that one idea is sufficient to explain everything in the development from the premise, and that no experience can teach anything because everything is comprehended in this consistent process of logical deduction.¹⁷

Ideology depends on two pillars: unconditional belief in the truth of the ideology, and the use of terror as an organized and methodical practice of violence in order to spread fear among people. These two pillars are interdependent because the more that terror is employed, the less that people are convinced by the supposed truth of the ideology. In order to establish totalitarian movements, terror must be presented as a tool for carrying out a certain ideology. The ideology must win the adherence of many, even the majority.¹⁸ In the totalitarian state, law and power are converted into an ideology that has to persuade and mobilize people, before terror can be stabilized in such way that its use does not appear arbitrary.¹⁹ As Arendt says, "If lawfulness is the essence of

¹⁴ Adam Daniel Rotfeld, "The Lemkin concept of genocide: A new definition for an old crime," *PISM Series 1* (2010).

¹⁵ Agnes Heller, "Radical Evil in Modernity: on Genocide, Totalitarian Terror, and the Holocaust," *Thesis Eleven* 101 (2010).

¹⁶ Finn Bowring, *Hannah Arendt: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Pluto Press, 2011).

¹⁷ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, 2004), 604-05.

¹⁸ Heller, "Radical Evil."

¹⁹ Michal Aharoni, "Hannah Arendt and the Idea of Total Domination," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 24. 2 (2010).

non-tyrannical government and lawlessness is the essence of tyranny, then terror is the essence of totalitarian domination.”²⁰

As a totalitarian movement, the Ba‘thist regime attempted to turn Iraq into a mass society. The “mass” is the raw material of totalitarianism: people without a desire for political organization or consciousness of class interests. As selfless individuals, they exist outside of political and social networks. Abnormal social relationships and isolation become the main features of the mass.²¹ Therefore, they are characterized by political and social marginality. They are more loyal to ideological “fictions” than to concrete interests. As a result, the masses are the perfect tools of the totalitarian regime.²² They offer them unconditional loyalty.²³ As Arendt maintains,

Totalitarian movements are mass organizations of atomized, isolated individuals. Compared with all other parties and movements, their most conspicuous external characteristic is their demand for total, unrestricted, unconditional, and unalterable loyalty of the individual member. . . . Such loyalty can be expected only from the completely isolated human being who, without any other social ties to family, friends, comrades, derives his sense of having a place in the world only from his belonging to a movement, his membership in the party.²⁴

Fear and faith were the most important elements of Ba‘thist ideology. Unlike other Iraqi tyrannies, Ba‘thists wanted to control and dominate not only the political realm, but also the minds of their subjects, striving to create an atmosphere of paranoiac distrust between friends, colleagues, and even relatives. It follows that all forms of organization not directly under control of the Ba‘th party had to be wiped out. The public had to be atomized and broken up, society, silenced and depoliticized. Fear became the glue that held the Iraqi body politic together. In the Ba‘thist view, even chemical weapons were an acceptable way to terrorize and bind society together. The Ba‘th regime endeavored to break down all non-political bonds, which had the potential to raise a demand against the party. As a consequence of Ba‘th party rule, by the 1980s, the Iraqi state, civil society, and people had turned into a great, single, shapeless frightened mass. The result was a true regime of terror.²⁵

As all totalitarian regimes share a similar type of ideology, it follows that all totalitarian regimes commit genocide and ethnic cleansing.²⁶

²⁰ Arendt, *The Origins*, 599.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Peter Baehr, “The Masses in Hannah Arendt’s Theory of Totalitarianism,” *The Good Society* 16.2 (2007).

²³ Bowring, *Hannah Arendt*.

²⁴ Arendt, *The Origins*, 429.

²⁵ Makiya, “The Republic.”

²⁶ Heller, “Radical Evil.”

III. Total Domination

Arendt in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* claims that the Nazi regime offered three solutions to the “Jewish problem” in Germany: expulsion, concentration, and, finally, liquidation.²⁷ In a similar manner, the Ba‘th regime offered three solutions for the Kurdish problem in Iraq: forced Arabization and deportations, resettlement in concentration camps, and, finally, annihilation, as realized in the *Anfal* campaign.

The Arabization Process

In the mid-1970s, the Ba‘th regime started the process of “Arabizing” the Kurds in the oil-rich provinces of Kirkuk, Khanaqeen, and Sinjar. This process of exterminating Kurdish national identity entailed deportations, arrests, summary executions, assassinations, and public hangings.

The regime attempted to resettle Kurds from Mosul, Diyala, and Kirkuk in order to depopulate these provinces and change their demography. In 1976, Kurdish areas were severed from Kirkuk province, and their old names were changed to *Ta‘mim* (nationalization). The name of Khanaqeen province was changed to *Uruba* (Arabism), and use of the term Kurdistan was forbidden and replaced instead with the Arabic term for “northern region” (*minteqat-al-shimal*). Teaching the Kurdish language also was prohibited.

Meanwhile, the Ba‘th government rounded up Kurdish families and transported them in army trucks to desert camps or to Arab villages in the southwestern desert of Iraq, where they were forcibly settled in small groups. These places were designated for the Kurdish deportations by the “Higher Committee for the Affairs of the North” commanded by Saddam Hussein.²⁸ In addition, hundreds of thousands of Kurds left their historical lands and towns to take refuge in the mountains, as Kurdish villages and districts were bombed with napalm by the Ba‘th government.²⁹

Concentration Camps

From the 1970s to the late 1980s, the Ba‘th government completely destroyed Kurdish villages along the Turkish and Iranian borders. The villages were ruined, water wells filled up, orchards were cut down or burned, and the villagers were taken to concentration camps. Altogether, almost five thousand Kurdish villages, approximately 80 percent of all Kurdish villages in Iraq, were ruined.³⁰ For example, about sixteen kilometers from Iranian border, the town of Qala‘t Diza was razed and its inhabitants were taken to

²⁷ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (London: A Penguin Book, 1992).

²⁸ Makiya, “The Republic”; Bengio, “The Kurds of Iraq”; Choman Hardi, *Gendered Experiences of Genocide: Anfal Survivors in Kurdistan-Iraq* (Surrey, 2011); Kirmanj and Rifaat, “The Kurdish Genocide.”

²⁹ Makiya, “The Republic”.

³⁰ Van Martin Bruinessen, “Genocide in Kurdistan,” in *The Widening Circle of Genocide*, ed. Israel W. Charney, (New Brunswick, New York: Transaction Publishers, 1994).

concentration camps. In a similar manner, the town of Halabja was flattened to the ground and its residents were taken to the government-created “New Saddam City Halabja.”³¹

Additionally, in 1983, the Ba‘th regime attacked the villages of the Barzan tribe (from which Kurdish leader Mustafa Barzani hails) and flattened them to the ground, and then deported the villagers to concentration camps near Erbil. After that, the women, children, and men were divided into different groups. Women and children remained in the camps, where women faced rape and humiliation.³² Male villagers aged 8 to 70 – in total, about eight thousand – were killed in mass execution.³³ Some of them were used as guinea pigs with which to test the effectiveness of various chemical gases.³⁴

The Final Solution

For security reasons the Ba‘th regime in the late 1980s named the Kurdish rural areas and villages the “Prohibited Zone.” The villagers who lived there were denied food supplies and disconnected from the outside world. As they were considered *Peshmarga* (Kurdish freedom fighters) the villagers were called “saboteurs” by Ba‘thist regime. In 1987, prior to the *Anfal* campaign, the Ba‘th regime conducted a national census as a preparation for its “final solution” to the Kurdish problem. The government gave the villagers two choices: they could either register themselves and resettle in concentration camps, or they would lose Iraqi citizenship and be labelled as saboteurs. Those who declined to register were then selected for extermination.³⁵ In February 1988, the *Anfal* campaign began. A Ba‘th party document circulated internally stated that their strategic goal was to end the Kurdish problem permanently.³⁶

The *Anfal* campaign was carried out in eight stages over the course of six and a half months from 21 February 1988 to 6 September 1988. Saddam Hussein authorized his cousin Ali Hassan Al-Majeed (best known as “Chemical Ali”) to mass murder Kurdish people. Ali Hassan’s troops were ordered to shoot anything that moves, level all the villages and towns of Kurdistan to the ground, burn down anything green, and dry out every water source.³⁷ The attacks began with the deployment of chemical poison gases to terrify and kill people. Then, ground attacks started and civilians were taken in military vehicles and tractors, to be driven to concentration camps such as Topzawa, Nugrasalman, Qala’t, and Nizarka. In the camps, the women and children, the men and teenage boys, and the elderly were separated into three groups. Faraj, an *Anfal* survivor, recalled that “in *Topzawa*,

³¹ Van Martin Bruinessen, “Genocide in Kurdistan,” in *The Widening Circle of Genocide*, ed. Israel W. Charney, (New Brunswick, New York: Transaction Publishers, 1994); Bengio, “The Kurds of Iraq.”

³² Bruinessen, “Genocide in Kurdistan.”

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Bruinessen, “Genocide in Kurdistan”; Bengio, “The Kurds of Iraq.”

³⁵ Hardi, “Gendered Experiences of Genocide.”

³⁶ Bengio, “The Kurds of Iraq.”

³⁷ Faraj, “An Eyewitness of the *Anfal*,” interviewed by Arif Qurbany, trans. Abdulkarim Uzeri (Sulaymaniyah: Karo Press, 2018).

the classification started. Women and children in one place, young girls in a different one, old men and women together and young men like ourselves were classified differently.”³⁸ The young men were selected immediately for annihilation, transferred to shooting fields, and buried in the mass graves with bulldozers in the Iraqi deserts.³⁹ “The real hallmark of the *Anfal* campaign was the bureaucratically organized, routinely administrated mass killing of village inhabitants for no other reason than that they happened to live in an area that was now designated as ‘prohibited zone for security reasons.’”⁴⁰ It was also well documented by the state. As Bruinssen states, “The Iraqi Kurdish massacres have thus become one of the best documented cases of genocide since the Holocaust.”⁴¹

The term of *al-Anfal* means the “spoils” of battle. It derives from the eighth sura of the Qur’an; it had come to the Prophet Muhammad in the aftermath of the first great battle of the new faith at Badr. *Surah al-Anfal* was designed to define the laws of *ghanima*: the division of booty among the Muslims. “They ask you about the spoils, *al-anfal*. Say: *al-anfal* belong to God and the Apostle. Therefore have fear of God and end your disputes.”⁴²

The Ba’thist government wanted to provide Islamic justification for the *Anfal* campaign to put the punishment described in that sura into practice against the Kurds.⁴³ The sura prescribes the following punishment:

God revealed His will to the angels, saying: “I shall be with you. Give courage to the believers. I shall cast terror into the hearts of the infidels. Strike off their heads, strike off the very tips of their fingers!” That was because they defied God and His apostle. He that defies God and His apostle shall be sternly punished by God. We said to them: “Taste this. The scourge of Fire awaits the unbelievers.”⁴⁴

Referencing the above sura, the Ba’th regime justified its genocidal actions in the “prohibited zones”:

Did this [Sura] translate into the idea that 1,364 years later, the boy Taimour [an *Anfal* survivor] is an unbeliever who tasted the scourge of fire from Ba’thist angels? Taimour is not an Arab; he is a Kurd who did not speak Arabic when he was taken from his village in the summer of 1988. . . . Ba’th were interpreting the eighth Sura of the Qur’an to mean that the village Taimour came from, the livestock his family raised, the grain stocks they stored, in fact their every personal possession were lawfully at the absolute disposal of the central government in Baghdad.⁴⁵

³⁸ Faraj, “An Eyewitness of the *Anfal*,” 53.

³⁹ Hardi, “Gendered Experiences of Genocide.”

⁴⁰ Kanan Makiya, *Cruelty and Silence* (London: W. W Norton & Company, 1993), 167.

⁴¹ Bruinssen, “Genocide in Kurdistan,” 12.

⁴² The Qur’an, 8:1.

⁴³ Bengio, “The Kurds of Iraq.”

⁴⁴ The Qur’an, 8:12.

⁴⁵ Makiya, *Cruelty and Silence*, 157-58.

According to a document recovered by Human Rights Watch, members of *afwaj* (regiments) were advised that “the Peshmarga are infidels and they shall be treated as such. You shall take any Peshmerga’s property that you may seize while fighting them. Their wives are lawfully yours (*halal*), as are their sheep and cattle.”⁴⁶

Michel Aflaq claims that the Islamic revolution of fourteen centuries ago was re-enacted in the modern Ba’thist Arab revolution. He argued that the Qur’an was written in Arabic and revealed to an Arab.⁴⁷ Thus, the Ba’th regime used Islam against Kurds and adopted portions of the Qur’an to justify the *Anfal* campaign in 1988.

The Ba’thist regime had taken these steps as preparation toward total domination of Iraq. In her masterpiece *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt identified three aspects of human personhood that are killed by totalitarian regimes in the process of asserting total domination: the juridical person, the moral person, and the spontaneity of humankind.

1. Killing the Juridical Person

Arendt posits that destroying the “juridical person” in the human being is a necessary step in depriving a group of people of all rights and rendering them stateless and defenseless. This is an essential step toward total domination. Faraj, the *Anfal* survivor, wondered why the Ba’thists who did these acts, if they were in fact criminals, did not face criminal trial. Where were the lawyers and judge? Where was the shari’a (Islamic law)? Even if the Kurdish adult men and women who were killed were in some way guilty, then what about the children and babies? “We heard the stories of women giving birth to their babies on board of the military vehicles! Were these babies born as criminals? These questions and tens of others were jumping to my mind; I was thinking to find a way to understand Saddam Hussein’s mentality,” Faraj said.⁴⁸

Arendt may provide an answer to these questions when she observes that totalitarian terror is directed against “objective enemies” who are “absolutely innocent people” who do not have any place in the “legal order,” not even as criminals, because they did not commit any crimes.⁴⁹ This process of excluding entire categories of people and treating their very existence as an intolerable crime is what ruins the juridical person in the human being. As a consequence, these people become “rightless,” and consequently “stateless” as well. This is something that all totalitarian ideologies have in common: individuals are locked up in prison, deported to concentration camps, and summarily executed solely on the basis of some group membership.⁵⁰

The Ba’th secret police invented the enemies of the Ba’thist revolution. As Saddam Hussein stated, “the revolution chooses its enemies among the people

⁴⁶ Human Rights Watch, *Genocide in Iraq: The Anfal Campaign against the Kurds* (New York, 1993): <https://www.hrw.org/reports/pdfs/i/iraq/iraq.937/anfalfull.pdf>.

⁴⁷ Aflaq, “Fi Sabil al-Ba’ath.”

⁴⁸ Faraj, “An Eyewitness of the Anfal,” 61.

⁴⁹ Arendt, *The Origins*.

⁵⁰ Heller, “Radical Evil in Modernity.”

who are against its program and who intend to harm its main principles.”⁵¹ Faraj and his fellow neighbors who were targeted in the *Anfal* campaign were “innocent people” and “chosen enemies” who were excluded from the Iraqi legal system. They were not tried as criminals, as they did not commit any crimes. The only reason for their condemnation was that they were Kurds.

2. Killing the Moral Person in the Human Being

According to Arendt, “Totalitarian terror achieved its most terrible triumph when it succeeded in cutting the moral person off from the individual.” She observes that there are three consequences of killing the moral person: “Firstly, there is no room for a careful complaint and resistance. Secondly, human solidarity is eliminated and resulted in total isolation, because of the perpetual struggle for life. Finally, the victims become conniver in the totalitarian crimes.”⁵²

Such consequences indeed flowed from the *Anfal* campaign. Ramadan, another *Anfal* survivor, explained, “although we were all family members and relatives it was not easy to decide anything together! The tragedy was very painful; no logical decisions can be taken in such hard situations.”⁵³ Faraj, the other survivor quoted above, explained that they were starved, terrified, and exhausted in the concentration camps and could not say a word of dissent without incurring the wrath of their barbaric prison guards. “*Anfal* was a unique tyranny; it can only be compared to the Nazi holocaust.”⁵⁴

In the concentration camps, the victims are constantly on the verge of death. Concentration camp inmates were absolutely isolated, as if they had vanished from the face of the earth. With genuine moral choice taken away from them, the camps became “holes of oblivion,” “the victims made to disappear without a trace.” Murder became mechanized, industrialized, and nearly automatic.⁵⁵ In almost all totalitarian regimes, ethnic cleansing becomes a common practice carried out on a grand scale.⁵⁶

3. Destroying the Spontaneity of Human Beings

After killing the juridical and moral person inside the human being, the next great aim of a totalitarian state is to defeat the spontaneity and plurality of individuals, in favor of a human being who is more like chattel, whose reactions can be predicted and trained like Pavlov’s dogs.⁵⁷

Arendt believes that as human beings, we are unique as a species because of our individuality and capacity for spontaneous thought and action. Hence,

⁵¹ Makiya, *The Republic of Fear*, 20.

⁵² Arendt, *The Origins*, 583.

⁵³ Ramadan, “The First Survivor of the Youth Mass Graves of *Anfal* Campaign,” interviewed by Arif Qurbany, trans. Abdulkarim Uzeri (Sulaymaniyah: Karo Press, 2018), 31.

⁵⁴ Faraj, “An Eyewitness of the *Anfal*,” 28.

⁵⁵ Michal Aharony, “Hannah Arendt and the Idea of Total Domination,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 24.2 (2010).

⁵⁶ Irving Louis Horowitz, “Hannah Arendt: Juridical Critic of Totalitarianism,” *Modern Age* 39.4, (1997). Heller, “Radical Evil in Modernity.”

⁵⁷ Aharony, “Hannah Arendt and the Idea of Total Domination.”

human beings are essentially unpredictable. In contrast, in concentration camps, the human-being is changed into something subhuman, a creature without capacity of choice and action. Such camps are laboratories that enact the crucial belief of totalitarianism that “everything is possible.” As Arendt says,

What totalitarian ideologies therefore aim at is. . . the transformation of human nature itself. The concentration camps are the laboratories where changes in human nature are tested. . . Human nature as such is at stake, and even though it seems that these experiments succeed, not in changing man, but only in destroying him.⁵⁸

The total terror which is practiced in the camps is the essence of the totalitarian government. What is happening there is not simply the killing of people on an industrial scale, but the eradication of their capacity for action and individuality. Taimur, who is an *Anfal* survivor, compared the villagers’ situation in the concentration camps to the Day of Judgment. He could not ascertain the amount of fear and confusion they lived in, as they had lost the ability to clearly differentiate between good and bad or right and wrong. Taimur also explains their reaction when two children, 8 or 9 years old, died because of starvation, dehydration, and heat shock. “No one, even their mothers, did wailing and mourning for the children, because all of us were breathless and waiting to die beside them, we felt that life has no values anymore.”

Furthermore, Taimur wondered “why mothers didn’t cry for the fate of their children and nobody had attempted to escape or resist.”⁵⁹ As Arendt put it, “the alternative is no longer between good and evil, but between murder and murder.”⁶⁰

Arendt defines genocide as an attack on “human status” or upon “human plurality as such.”⁶¹ Genocide demolishes the diversity of human beings; therefore, it is a crime against the human condition as such. For Arendt, the consequences of genocide are not limited to mass killings, but potentially encompass the eternal as well. With genocide, civic life, constitutional order, and the public world are all destroyed along with people’s lives.⁶²

Conclusion

As a totalitarian movement, the Ba’th party attempted through its ideology to turn Iraqi society into a shapeless mass – a crucial precondition for totalitarian regimes. By fear and terror the Ba’thist regime strived for total domination. As

⁵⁸ Arendt, *The Origins*, 591.

⁵⁹ Taimur, “The Only Survivor of Women and Children in the *Anfal* Campaign,” interviewed by Arif Qurbany, trans. Abdulkarim Uzeri (Sulaymaniyah: Karo Press, 2018), 56-57.

⁶⁰ Arendt, *The Origins*, 583.

⁶¹ Dan Stone, “Defending the Plural: Hannah Arendt and Genocide Studies” *New Formations* 71 (2011).

⁶² Seyla Benhabib, “International Law and Human Plurality in the Shadow of Totalitarianism: Hannah Arendt and Raphael Lemkin,” *Constellations* 16.2 (2009).

this article has demonstrated, the genocide committed during the *Anfal* campaign was derived from the totalitarian elements inherent in the Ba‘thist regime, namely ideology, terror, and total domination.

In the *Anfal* campaign, first the term “Kurd” was formulated in Ba‘thist ideology as a problem, a population untrue to the ideology of Arabism. Second, the Kurds were rounded up and confined in concentration camps. Third, and finally, it was decided to eradicate the Kurdish rural areas. Thus, the *Anfal* campaign followed three stages: defining, concentrating, and annihilating the Kurds.