

Forensic Truth and Political Silence: Mass Graves of Halabja as Evidence of Genocide

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Abstract

Background and objectives:

The 1988 Halabja chemical attack has come to be synonymous with acts of genocidal violence, but to many Kurds, atrocity lies best buried in mass graves. This paper will look at the nature of forensic exhumations and how they are functioning between science, law and politics in Halabja and shall analyze the evidentiary strength and ethical ramifications of these exhumations besides the social impact of the same. It posits the question of whether mass graves can serve as both a source of legal accountability, and a site of memory which can be inhabited, in light of political silencing and denial that continues to endure.

Methods: A qualitative design employing Van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology guided the inquiry. Twelve purposively sampled participants included direct survivors of the 1988 Halabja genocide (n=5), relatives of victims (n=4), and forensic experts (n=3), aged 25–72, residing in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Semi-structured interviews (65–85 minutes) were conducted from June to August 2025 to collect required data which were analyzed through Van Manen's six-step approach to identify essential themes.

Results: Five main themes emerged: (1) forensic exhumations as truth-seeking tools; (2) justice and legal accountability; (3) political silence and denial; (4) social and psychological impacts on families and communities; and (5) mass graves as sites of memory and political struggle.

Conclusion: In Halabja, exhumation holds the potential to anchor real and lasting truth and contribute to genocide accountability when it is conducted independently, rigorously scientific, and transparent; when courts model the limitations imposed by inference; and when exhumation is placed in pace with psychosocial care and in concert with culturally resonant memorial activities. The reduction of political obstruction, the enhancement of liaison between the families and forensic scientists, and the protection of chain-of-custody are the indispensable elements to transform the results of forensics to recognition, justice, and valuable commemoration.

Keywords: Halabja; Kurdistan Region of Iraq; mass graves; forensic exhumation; genocide; political denial; transitional justice; psychosocial impact

Introduction

The chemical attack on Halabja in 1988 came to

serve as an icon of genocidal violence all over the world, but to most Kurds the truth resides in those mass graves that can be found across Iraq. Forensic exhumations are central to present-day truth-seeking itself, converting the clandestine grave into a repository of an atrocity record. Forensic teams allow an evaluation based on osteological analysis, DNA-led identification, and standardized excavation to provide a solid narrative that can support tendencies of organized violence and even contribute to the connection between perpetrators and victims (Kayser & de Knijff, 2011). At the same time, exhumation is never purely technical: it unfolds within dense legal, cultural, and political terrains, where competing claims over responsibility and remembrance are common (Ferrándiz, 2013; Subotić, 2015).

As tools for legal accountability, mass graves have supplied pivotal evidence in genocide prosecutions by establishing scale, *modus operandi*, and victim profiles, and by challenging denial in court. But the investigative potential of forensics is tempered by unresolved legal deficiencies, including political meddling and the slowing of investigations as well as the inconsistent adoption of scientific discoveries in the courts. Other complications, such as poor-quality remains, partial kinship reference databases, and mixed remains also influence what is identifiable and confirmable, which is another reason why practices should be rigorous and chain-of-custody supported (Kayser & de Knijff, 2011).

Exhumations have social and psychological reverberation. Individuals and their families can heal after years of not having seen the missing and having suffered ambiguous loss with the identification as there can be a restoration of dignity, and the death can be mourned, but it can also reopen wounds or heighten tensions in a community (Robins, 2013). Ethical and religious factors, like proper treatment, time of reburial, and family acceptance are part of the humane practice and trust of the community (Al-Dawoody, 2017).

This paper locates the mass graves of Halabja at the convergence of science, law, and politics to inquire whether such a location is meant to act wholesomely

as a venue of legal prosecution, a venereal living space, or as a combined union of both. The study is vital because the case of Halabja has been the subject of unresolved conflicts between forensic reality and political silence, which directly affects the aspects of justice and reparation. By bringing to the fore the demographic lives of families as well as the evidentiary life paths of exhumations, the study fills a practical and ethical gap in genocide documentation. Its importance is found in its capacity to inform rights-based, culturally aware forensic practice, promote forensic findings, be used to build the probative value of mass grave investigations, as well as counter denial through publicly intelligible, empirically based accounts of atrocity.

Methods

Study Design

This qualitative study utilized Van Manen's (1990) hermeneutic phenomenological approach. The adopted methodology allowed exploring the experiences of the survivors of a 1988 chemical attack on Halabja, as well as the stories of the relatives of the victims in detail. It was also used to provide a framework by which it examined their personal stories of reconstruction of local communities, memory, trauma, and resilience.

Participants

The number of participants in the study was twelve that included direct victims of the 1988 chemical bombardment (3 males and 2 females), relatives of the deceased (2 males and 2 females), and three forensic experts. These individuals were selected through purposive sampling. Inclusion criteria required participants to be survivors from the Halabja genocide and the victims' relatives who expressed willingness to engage in the research and had firsthand post-genocide experiences. Those who were unwilling to participate were excluded. The participants' age ranged from 25 to 72 years.

Data Collection

Required data was gathered based on the semi-

structured interviews that were conducted from June to August 2025. The interviews were carried out predominantly at the home (or other safe) location of the participants. Data was recorded until a thematic saturation was reached, at a point no new themes could be elicited by continued discussions. The direct victims were subjected to questions such as: “Can you tell me about your memories about the events surrounding the Halabja attacks?”, “How were you impacted by those same events conditioning your everyday life imminently and longer-term?”, “How have you felt about the way the events have been recognized/not realized by the powers, or the world at large?”, “What does truth mean to you regarding what happened in Halabja?”, and “When you hear of mass graves being investigated as evidence, what thoughts or feelings are aroused?” Among some of the questions that were posed to the relatives of the victims were, “What came to mind when you heard about the mass graves?” and, “Do you feel it has been safe or encouraged to speak openly about what happened to your loved one?”, and, “What do you want the work on mass graves to accomplish?” and, “What message would you like to address to future generations about these events?” The forensic experts were also asked such questions as “How do you go about the process of mass grave examination in Halabja” and “What causes difficulties in the process of identifying the victims and documenting evidence of genocide?”. Examples of questions asked from the forensic experts included: “Have you come across any political interference or obstacles to your work?”, “How do you notify the families of the affected individuals of the findings and what is your ethical intrigue?”, and “What would be the role of forensics evidence in the international justice efforts?”. All the interviews were conducted at different lengths lasting approximately sixty-five or eighty-five minutes; they were taped with the consent of the participants and then transcribed verbatim and later translated into English so as they can be analyzed.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed six methodological steps outlined by Van Manen (1990). The first step

involved focusing on lived experiences; the lead researcher – an expert on forensics and genocide who grew up within the affected community – grounded this inquiry in deep contextual knowledge. The second step entailed investigating lived experiences by selecting survivors and the victims’ relatives with direct accounts of the Halabja genocide. Essential themes were identified through phenomenological thematic analysis as part of the third step. The fourth step emphasized capturing the participants’ voices through iterative writing processes. Maintaining a strong connection to participants’ experiences constituted the fifth step; each theme was contextualized within their narratives. Finally, a balance between individual coded transcripts and broader holistic themes was achieved by moving back and forth between these elements (Van Manen, 1990).

Trustworthiness

To promote the dependability of the results, lengthier periods of contact with the participants, member-checking practices, and peer professional debriefings were used. The strong relationship between the researchers and the participants provided the opportunity to collect all the desired information. The abundant number of forensic studies, Anfal and genocide research, and personal experience of the researcher contributed to the credibility of the work, as well as provided necessary contextual background. Transcripts were subjected to several de-briefings and examined several times to be accurate; participant narratives were the basis of interpretations.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance of this study was obtained through Hawler Medical University College of Nursing-Ethics Committee (Project No. XX; Approval Date: DD MM YYYY). Before the start of participation, all the subjects were provided with all the necessary information about the aims of the study, confidentiality rules, and rights that included the right to refuse to participate at any point without recrimination. Participants were asked to sign consent forms that are not binding; they were all volunteers and there were principles of informed

consent. All the physical or digital data was kept confidential; codes (e.g., DV1, DV2, etc. for direct victims; VR1, VR2, etc. for victims' relatives; and FE1, FE2, etc. for forensic experts) were used in order not to break the anonymity.

Results

Analyzing the data obtained from the interviews resulted in the emergence of five main themes, namely, “forensic exhumations as truth-seeking tools”, “justice and legal accountability”, “political silence and denial”, “social and psychological impact on families and communities”, and “mass graves as sites of memory and political struggle”. Quotes supporting each main theme and subthemes are presented below.

Main Theme 1. Forensic Exhumations as Truth-Seeking Tools

Forensic examinations of mass graves elicit physical evidence of the atrocities in that important transformation of memory into fact. Survivors and professional testimonials talk of how opening the earth has opened the truth that cannot be easily covered by the breeze of politics.

“The soil of Halabja holds testimony that does not change with politics. Exhumations translate that silence into measurable facts, allowing grief to become evidence.” – FE3

“When they unsealed the ground, I felt both fear and relief. At last, our tale in the shadows which mother told to me, of a dream in place of truth, had something the world could touch and believe.” – VR 4

Subtheme 1.1. Scientific Documentation of Atrocity

Careful forensic investigation – by means of bone injuries, chemical remains, and burial sites – provides undeniable proofs of genocide and confirms the memories of the survivors.

“Trauma and chemical residue patterns, and stratigraphy meet and create a story to which no speech can do anything. Our duty is to describe every single detail to document an atrocity before doubt.” – FE1

“People used to say that we exaggerated but the measurements in these bones matched the nights that we remember. Science is now finally talking the language of our memories.” – DV3

Subtheme 1.2. Challenges of Identification and Verification

The process of recovery and identification of remains is delayed, the evidence is often degraded, and crossing the ethical lines to benefit family is a challenge, where science and family patience is put to the test.

“DNA is potent, but war destroys documentation and time corrupts collections. Verification is a time-consuming puzzle where ethics, consent, and chain of custody should not become a rushed process.” – FE3

“They took blood to make it match my brother and I said yes and waited through seasons. When names are jailed in the lab, hope is thin.” – VR2

Main Theme 2. Justice and Legal Accountability

Evidence of mass graves can be used as a base for prosecution, but the legal system can be too slow to cope with grief. There are testimonies that demonstrate how families and the experts want the courts to acknowledge atrocity.

“I testified so the court would see more than numbers; I wanted them to see my father’s empty chair. Justice is when absence is counted as a crime, not a coincidence.” – DV5

“Our findings are not accusations; they are just descriptions. In court, things change, and detailed accounts could sound like an accusing finger.” – FE2

Subtheme 2.1. Mass Graves as Evidence in Court

Forensic evidence, when properly interpreted, connects patterns of killing to intentional killing, which aids a court find crimes of genocide.

“Patterns of injury trajectories, cluster injury, and demographic trends identify intent as opposed to accidents. If combined, they detail a pattern that is consistent with genocidal intent and thus could be considered by a court.” – FE1

“Maps and bones had spoken, in court, the stories we could hardly say. The jury decides in the trench before it drops the gavel down.” – VR1

Subtheme 2.2. Gaps in Legal Processes

Political opposition, and lack of international cooperation coupled with bureaucracy are always setbacks to any justice and the results are usually left to the mercy of the families of the victims.

“A file moves more slowly than the bereavement, and a political file moves in the obverse direction. Each delay will seem that someone is haggling with our dead.” – VR2

“We have met the standards in the field, but the case became stalled in corridors where evidence has no microscope. Impunity spreads in the spaces between procedures.” – FE1

Main Theme 3. Political Silence and Denial

Survivors are faced with both the memory of mass killing, as well as attempts to downplay, distort or erase it. This forced silence adds trauma and hinders realization.

“Another weapon was silence once the gas had disappeared, so that we could no longer be sure of our own wounds sacrifice. Denial tried to bury us twice.” – DV1

“Officials offered condolences without names and apologies without responsibility. We are asked to heal in the dark.” – VR2

Subtheme 3.1. Suppression or Manipulation of Findings

Governments and other stakeholders occasionally influence those investigating to tone down or mask conclusions, misrepresenting the body of science.

“We were pressed to issue summaries out of context as though numbers would obscure the truth. Scientific circumspection was conjured into political equivocality.” – FE2

“They claimed the reports to be inconclusive as we stared at a field full of wedding rings. It was as though someone was deleting us with an insidious phrasing.” – VR3

Subtheme 3.2. Competing Narratives of Responsibility

The arguments about whose fault it is cause discrepancies of version, but the congruence in grave sites makes denials a misguided effort.

“Each side points to the other while we point to the graves. The arguments sound loud until you stand where the earth is quiet.” – DV4

“Attribution is contested, but pattern consistency across sites narrows the story. The data reduces the room for convenient myths.” – FE1

Main Theme 4. Social and Psychological Impact on Families and Communities

The identification works to locate, dig up, and identify the murdered loved ones has a vast impact on the communal grieving process, creating finality in some individuals and an opening of old wounds on others.

“We heard where he slept patched up a hole in our house. Grief remained, but he had ceased to wandering.” – VR3

“Local events held at the site of the exhumations were like restored vitality to our community. The remembering and together we were held in it.” – DV4

Subtheme 4.1. Healing Through Knowing

When families are given confirmed identifications and proper burials, grief is more resilient, and the communities can regain dignity.

“An inscription on a tomb is a sort of medication that we can purchase. It does not cure pain, but it gives it a place to live.” – VR4

“When they placed my mother’s bones in a real coffin, dignity entered the room. Farewell became possible.” – DV2

Subtheme 4.2. Trauma and Re-Traumatization

Although truth leads to recognition, digging up the past and reexamining evidence may revive painful memories and increase the feeling of loss.

“The first hue of dirt rattled like that night coming back. I wanted truth, but truth can reopen a wound

before it closes it.” – DVM1

“We plan pauses and support on excavation days because seeing evidence is emotionally heavy. Science must move with care where memories are fragile.” – FE3

Main Theme 5. Mass Graves as Sites of Memory and Political Struggle

Mass graves are at once repositories of evidence, sites of grief and political conflict, which require highly contentious decisions about choice among the values of justice, remembrance and other priorities.

“A mass grave is an archive as well as altar. Decisions around it will always be scientific and sacred at once.” – FE2

“Some want speeches; others want silence. We want respect that does not trade away the truth.” – VR3

Subtheme 5.1. Commemoration vs. Evidence Preservation

There is a conflict between honoring victims and safeguarding forensic integrity, which sections of the stakeholders are affected by.

“There is the problem of early memorialization that could interfere with stratigraphy as well as timelines. The illustration of to the present day protects the narrative to be given in the present day tomorrow.” – FE1

“At the end, it is important to have a place to pray but then not at the expense of losing the case. After the facts were safely collected, let the memorial rise.” – VR2

Subtheme 5.2. Local vs. International Priorities

When chosen culture-sensibly, local traditions and international practices of investigation may conflict, yet mutual effort can assure justice and cultural respect.

“The protocols brought about by foreign teams; the memories and names behind it brought forth by us. And the grave will teach me as well as you when we have stopped to notice another.” – DV2

“Evidence is covered by international standards, but meaning is covered by local customs. Justice lasts longer when both are honored.” – FE3

Discussion

Across five themes, the Halabja findings sit squarely within what scholars have termed the “forensic turn”, while adding a context-specific lens on chemical genocide, political silencing, and the moral economy of evidence. Participants’ insistence that exhumations “translate silence into measurable facts” echoes work showing how the recovery of human remains transforms contested memory into material claims that can travel into legal, scientific, and public arenas (Anstett & Dreyfus, 2015; Rosenblatt, 2015; Dziuban, 2017). However, the ambiguity of this turn is also reflected in the study, since forensic truth also makes things recognizable and accountable but at the same time remains inseparably linked to power, procedure, and politics (Rosenblatt, 2015).

On documented scientific findings, the focus of response in Halabja on patterned trauma, stratigraphy and the presence of chemical residues by Halabja respondents is notable, given that it is consistent with current best practice in forensic archaeology/anthropology, where the call is to excavation in a controlled context, taphonomy, and multi-modal research to be used in reconstruction of patterns of violence (Blau & Ubelaker, 2016; Cordner & Tidball-Binz, 2017). The forensic expert caution that “our findings are not accusations” mirrors a longstanding concern that courts and publics may overshoot the inferential limits of science, re-inscribing scientists as moral arbiters rather than expert witnesses (Anstett & Dreyfus, 2015). The Halabja material adds a notable dimension – possible chemical signatures of atrocity – underscoring the special probative value, and technical challenges, of integrating toxicological traces with osteological patterning to support intent and modus operandi in crimes of mass violence.

The difficulties of identification described here – degraded remains, fragmented documentation, and long waiting periods – closely match the resent

analyses of DNA-led identification regimes. International guidance highlights chain-of-custody, informed consent, and communication as ethical cornerstones when families (VR) live through “slow science” (Cordner & Tidball-Binz, 2017; OHCHR, 2016). Robins (2011) and Wagner (2019) similarly document the psychosocial costs of protracted waiting and the need to manage expectations without eroding trust. The Halabja testimonies brilliantly express this gap – “the names of those jailed”. And they demonstrate it even more forcefully in their support for continuing family liaison, clear timeliness, not merely continuing to re-adapt the law rather than letting in sunlight; participation in sampling, storage and return (Robins, 2011; Rosenblatt, 2015).

The study indicates that a large body of evidence may be derived from mass graves and that elements like victim demographics, patterns of killing and concealment show up time after time, whether at the heart of inferred intent for genocide or crimes against humanity (Clark, 2014; Cordner & Tidball-Binz, 2017). One of the participants who is involved continues to see the court as a place where his father’s empty chair can be touched, following a more general trend towards victim-centered justice. But the feeling that slow justice offers little solace is reflected in comparative studies which have found that trials are symbolically important and quite typical; in practical terms, they seldom keep pace with the demands of grief and may not provide families with acknowledgment they urgently require (Hayner, 2011; Robins, 2011). The theme “impunity spreads in the spaces between procedures” chimes with those who say it may not be lack of evidence but rather bureaucratic inertia and even more so geopolitical winds which frequently prevent cases from going forward (Clark, 2014; Rosenblatt, 2015).

Political silence and denial, what is here labelled as a “second burial”, is echoed strongly in international research, from Spain to the Balkans to Latin America. Ferrándiz (2013) shows how exhumations destabilize official narratives, provoking cycles of suppression, reframing, or discursive dilution like pressures Halabja experts faced to render

“equivocal” findings. Dziuban (2017) and Rosenblatt (2015) caution that even robust forensic outputs can be domesticated by state narratives; Halabja’s insistence that “the data reduces the room for convenient myths” rightly asserts evidentiary force but should be tempered by the literature’s reminder: data narrows, rather than eliminates, political contestation. This underscores the importance of independent forensic institutions, transparent peer review, and public-facing science communication to widen the constituency of those who can “read” the evidence (OHCHR, 2016; Cordner & Tidball-Binz, 2017).

The implications of the Halabja, however, brings out the contradiction between healing and destruction. Confirmed identifications and dignified burials are repeatedly linked to restored dignity, social cohesion, and the possibility of farewell – findings consistent with victim-centered transitional justice research (Robins, 2011; Hayner, 2011). At the same time, excavation days that “rattle like that night coming back” match comparative evidence on re-traumatization risks and the necessity of embedding psychosocial accompaniment and culturally competent rituals throughout forensic operations (Cordner & Tidball-Binz, 2017; Rosenblatt, 2015). The Halabja call for scheduled pauses and support is fully in line with best practice.

Finally, the theme of mass graves as arenas of memory and political struggle reflects a global tension: the grave as archive and altar. The friction between commemoration and preservation – “let the memorial rise” after documentation – is widely noted in Spain and elsewhere, where premature memorial interventions can compromise stratigraphy and evidentiary timelines (Ferrándiz, 2013; Anstett & Dreyfus, 2015). The Minnesota Protocol and forensic best practice frameworks align with the participants of Halabja on sequencing: the focus should be placed on safe recovery and documentation; followed by an inclusive memorialization of the event (OHCHR, 2016; Cordner and Tidball-Binz, 2017). The local-versus-international subtheme is also widespread: successful, acceptable investigations must be

established through a reconciliation of international norms and local customs, language, and ritual frames (Robins, 2011; Rosenblatt, 2015). The Halabja emphasis on “respect that does not trade away the truth” crisply captures this balancing act.

Conclusion

The findings of the present study add distinctive insights from chemical genocide and Kurdish experiences of denial and waiting. They confirm that exhumations can anchor truth and justice only when insulated from political manipulation, paced with psychosocial care, and integrated with locally resonant memorialization. Prioritizing independent forensics, family-centered processes, and transparent communication is essential to convert evidence into durable recognition.

Implications

Policy and practice implications follow directly. Invest in independent, adequately resourced forensic institutions with peer-reviewed protocols; establish standing family liaison teams to co-design sampling, communication, and return; sequence memorialization after exhaustive documentation; and create public, multilingual evidentiary narratives that resist political dilution without sacrificing scientific caution. Legally, pairing strategic prosecutions with broader truth-seeking and reparations can better align “what courts can deliver” with “what families ask”.

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