

Arbitrary Arrests of Iraqi Scientists: The Release of 'Dr Anthrax'.

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On the 17th of December, eight 'high value' Iraqis held without charge for over two years by the United States were released. They included Dr Huda Ammash, a distinguished internationally renowned, environmental biologist, Professor at Baghdad University, whose earned her PhD at the University of Missouri. Her father, former Iraqi Ambassador to the US, under the government of Abdul Karim Kassem (1958-1963) was executed in a purge to stamp authority by Saddam in 1981. In the 1990's Dr Ammash was, ironically offered a seat in the Legislature. When Saddam offered a position to say: 'No thanks, I've my career plan mapped out, was not an option', but her academic career remained her passion and primary focus.

Arrested by US troops, this brave, gentle woman suddenly became 'Mrs Anthrax' and featured on America's assinine playing cards of their 'most wanted', in the wild west, last chance saloon Iraq became after April 2003.

Dr Ammash's crime was her numerous scientific papers on the environmental and biological impact of sanctions and the horrific health cost of the weapons used in the 1991 Gulf war by Britain and the US. In 'Iraq Under Siege -the Deadly Impact of Sanctions and War' (Pluto Press, updated 2003 Ed: Anthony Arnone) contributors included Noam Chomsky, John Pilger, Howard Zinn, Denis Halliday - and Huda Ammash. All those the US and UK Administrations love to hate most, were under one cover and she was firmly allied with them.

Her introduction reads: 'The Gulf war ended in 1991, but the massive destruction linked to it continues. An unprecedented catastrophe resulting from a mixture of toxic, radiological, chemical and electromagnetic exposure is still causing substantial consequences to health and the environment, exacerbated by sanctions much of Iraq has been turned into a polluted and radioactive environment.' She understated.

She refers to the International Treaties outlawing such weapons, to depleted uranium (DU) weapons not being 'depleted' but a 'radioactive waste', the all in minutely detailed, careful, hard hitting, scientific, incontrovertible fact. 'DU is radiologically and chemically toxic to humans and other forms of life.' She details, well on the side of caution the '... terrifying total of three hundred and twenty to three hundred and fifty tonnes of DU expended ammunition.... scattered throughout Iraq and Kuwait.' She reminds that US Army manuals warn of the dangers, that the pollution enters the water table and thus can spread through the entire region ravaging the lives of those - young, older and yet unborn - not even in the conflict zone.

She writes of a less addressed subject: 'Electromagnetic pollution'. '....particularly dangerous because it is often undetected'. In Finland near early warning radar systems, '..pregnancy problems, anxiety, depression, fatality, heart failures, cardiovascular diseases, cancers ...leukaemia, eye and skin diseases ..' in excess have been recorded,as with those who work 'in other electromagnetic environments.' During the forty five day war, widely deployed electronic devices '... advanced radar systems, laser guided missiles ...released high frequency electromagnetic energy into the atmosphere ...' Chemical pollution included black rain, a soot laden atmosphere and environmental pollution was added to by soil ruination heavy metals such as nickel and vanadium also '.. changing the components of the ecosystem ..' producing an increase in rodents and scorpions.' Plants died in poisoned earth and in formerly fertile land: ' new fields of sand dunes were created.'

The British government were perfectly aware of Dr Ammash's non-anthrax credentials, they gave her a visa to speak at a Conference on Iraq's environment in Manchester in 2000, where their plants sat in their seats as the rest of the audience gave her a standing ovation. Iraqis too were in the audience, opposed to Saddam – many listened to her with tears in their eyes.

Huda Ammash tried to alert the world and redeem, save, her country's environment. She might also have saved Ken Bigley. His kidnapper's demand in October 2004 was, as with Margaret Hassan, release of women prisoners – all women prisoners. The British government said there were none, that after the depravities of Abu Ghraib they had been released (to call this economical with the truth would be another understatement.) The US Administration linked the demand to only Dr Ammash and a colleague Dr Rhab Taha. Colin Powell whose country is holding all Iraq hostage, said he didn't do deals with hostage takers – and Ken Bigley was beheaded. Even two illegally held women might have been a life saving gesture.

Another life to be saved is Dr Ammash herself, who passionately fighting for the environment she loved, had fallen its victim. She never mentioned the cancer she suffers, to which she has lost both her breasts. Brave, steely, elegant, gentle. Her treatment shames us all. Oh, and anthrax? Perhaps the US should arrest a few scientists at their very own Fort Detrick, Maryland, the US Army's 'Medical Research Institute' – possibly the world's largest producer of weapons grade anthrax

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