

# Radioactive Weapons Are Killing Innocent Civilians in Iraq—and the US Military is Behind It

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“Everyone seems to be dying of cancer. Every day one hears about another acquaintance or friend of a friend dying.”

On Monday, February 20, US-led coalition fighter jets bombed al-Shefaa, a residential area in eastern Mosul (Iraq). Sources from a variety of perspectives say that several dozen civilians died in the raid and a large number were wounded. The highest numbers are being quoted by the Islamic State’s Amaq News Agency, while the lower numbers come from al-Jazeera. The coalition commanders have not answered questions about the raids.

According to Airwars, a large number of civilians have been killed due to US-led coalition bombings that began in 2014. The total civilians killed range from 5,875 to 7,936, while those specifically killed by coalition airstrikes number between 2,405 and 3,517. These are twice the number of civilians as killed by Russian airstrikes in Syria, according to Airwars figures.



The Iraqi military confirms that it has slowed down its advance into Mosul because it does not know how to fight ISIS without endangering the 750,000 civilians in the region. The most recent UN situation report from Iraq counts 160,000 people already displaced as a result of the Mosul crisis. Low income levels, shortages of water, great threats because of the fighting – these define the situation for residents in and around Mosul.

A joint investigation by Airwars and Foreign Policy pushed the US military to confirm that in two incidents in 2015 the United States used depleted uranium (DU) shells against ISIS targets in Syria. When Airwars’ Samuel Oakford asked the United States military whether it had used any DU in Syria, they first denied it, then finally admitted to its use earlier this month. DU ammunition was fired from A-10 aircraft against fuel tankers.

Strikingly, the A-10 aircraft normally carries high explosive incendiary (HEI) ammunition which, according to its manufacturer General Dynamics, ‘provides fragmentation and incendiary effects for use against personnel, trucks, ammunition storage and many other targets’. The HEI would have been sufficient to destroy the fuel tankers, so that it was unnecessary to use DU – a radioactive substance – to contaminate parts of northern Syria.

Make the Desert Glow.

At the same time as the US was using radioactive weapons in Syria, Republican presidential

candidate Ted Cruz said of ISIS – ‘We will carpet bomb them into oblivion. I don’t know if sand can glow in the dark, but we’re going to find out’. This was plainly a reference to some kind of radioactive bombardment. It was precisely what the administration of Barack Obama had already been doing.

Not long after Cruz first made this comment – which became a standard for his stump speeches – Mark Halperin of Bloomberg asked another Republican presidential candidate, Donald Trump, whether he would go nuclear against ISIS. ‘Well, I’m never going to rule anything out’, replied Trump. When pushed by Chris Matthews of MSNBC on this issue, Trump said, ‘Somebody hits us within ISIS – you wouldn’t fight back with a nuke?’

Three generals who made their mark in Iraq between 1991 and 2008 now lead President Trump’s national security team. General James Mattis (Secretary of Defense), General John Kelley (Secretary of Homeland Security) and General H. R. McMaster (National Security Advisor) all led the US counter-insurgency operations in Iraq. Of the three, General James Mattis had the closest relationship to the use of radioactive weapons in Iraq. This was during the siege conducted by the United States against the city of Fallujah in 2004. To grasp the attitude of the US officers in this war, reflect for a minute on Mattis’ statement made in a 2003 speech to soldiers regarding how to comport themselves in Iraq, ‘Be polite, be professional, but have a plan to kill everybody you meet’.

Fallujah is one of the most forgotten contemporary US battlefields. In that battle to defeat the popular insurgency against the American occupation, the United States used chemical (white phosphorus) and radioactive (DU) weapons with great abandon. The fierceness of the war destroyed three quarters of the city and sent most of its population to the grave or into flight. At this time, General Mattis headed the 1st Marine Division that was key to the Fallujah war.

Ironically, the United States went into Iraq in 2003 with the claim that it wanted to destroy weapons of mass destruction. In turn, it was the United States that used weapons of mass destruction inside Iraq.

The United States dropped at least 116,000 kgs of DU ammunition during the bombing campaign of the 2003 Iraq War. At that time, A-10 fighter jets were used for these missions, the same planes used in Syria. Strike logs released to George Washington University in 2013, shows that in the early months of the war (March-April 2003), DU ammunition was used against cars and trucks as well as buildings of all kinds. The widespread use of these radioactive weapons across Iraq contaminated large swathes of the country. What transpired in Fallujah the next year was merely the continuation of what had become normal policy. The data from that war has not been released as of yet. It would show that DU weapons were fired not only from A-10 jets, but also from tanks and other ground-based devices. These not only contaminated the soil, but also endangered US troops.

It is not as if the US military did not know that DU weapons are dangerous. The US Environmental Protection Agency calls these weapons ‘a radiation health hazard when inside the body’. A 1975 US Air Force review suggested that these weapons not be used against troops, but only against ‘tanks, armored personnel carriers or other hard targets’. This prohibition was routinely violated during the US War on Iraq. In 2003, the UK’s Royal Society of Medicine and the UN Environment Program warned against the use of such weapons. None of these warnings were heeded. People like Mattis and Kelley had their

fingers on the trigger. There is no available evidence that they cautioned against what is tantamount to a war crime.

### Everyone Seems to be Dying of Cancer.

Evidence from Baghdad and Fallujah is compelling. Before she died of leukemia, artist Nuha al-Radi wrote, 'Everyone seems to be dying of cancer. Every day one hears about another acquaintance or friend of a friend dying. How many more die in hospitals that one does not know? Apparently, over 30 per cent of Iraqis have cancer, and there are a lot of kids with leukemia. The depleted uranium left by the US bombing campaign has turned Iraq into a cancer-infested country'.

Dr. Samira Allani, a pediatric specialist at the Fallujah General Hospital, sees the connection between Iraq and Japan – two countries struck hard by weapons of mass destruction. The rate of children born with birth defects in Fallujah are much greater than that of children born – after 1945 – in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The dust from DU emits alpha radiation, which experts say is twenty times more dangerous than the gamma radiation from nuclear weapons. There was no dramatic mushroom cloud over Baghdad or Fallujah, but the smaller explosions might have been just as deadly.

Over the years, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) has pushed a non-binding resolution in the UN General Assembly against the use of DU ammunition. Both in 2012 and 2014, the overwhelming majority of the world's states voted for a resolution brought by the NAM against DU weapons. Both times the United States, the United Kingdom, France and Israel voted against the resolution. In December 2014, the NAM resolution came just as US A-10 fighter jets arrived in Kuwait to bomb ISIS targets in Syria and Iraq. There was fear that the US would use DU weapons once more in the region. This fear, we now find, was not unwarranted. The US has said that it used DU twice. One should not be comforted by this number, since there might be other instances where DU was used in the last few years.

It would be naïve to assume that the United States and its coalition are not using DU weaponry in the fight against ISIS in Mosul and elsewhere. These are dangerous weapons, whose radioactivity lasts a very long time and damages societies for generations. Statements by Trump and Cruz about the use of nuclear weapons and the lack of outrage against that shows how desensitized the population has become about violence against the brown bodies of West Asia.

And even against the ecology of the region. In her captivating memoir, Nuha al-Radi writes about fleeing into her family orchard when the US bombing of Iraq took place in 2003. 'The birds have taken the worst beating of all', she wrote. 'They have sensitive souls, which cannot take all this hideous noise and vibration. All the caged lovebirds have died from the shock of the blasts, while birds in the wild fly upside down and do crazy somersaults. Hundreds, if not thousands, have died in the orchard. Lonely survivors fly about in distracted fashion'.

Whether Nuha, powerful artist that she was, wrote of the birds alone or wrote with allegory close to her pen is moot. Both the birds and Iraqis as well Syrians go about in a distracted fashion. Their lives continue to be turned askew by the hideous bombardment of this ongoing war.

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