

Uranium in Iraq: the Poisonous Legacy of the Iraq Wars

Review of Abdul-Haq Al-Ani and Joanne Baker's book

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Hegel remarks upon the appearance of “concrete evil” in history, the intermittent eruption of human malevolence on a colossal scale capable of destroying entire societies. Perpetrators of world-historical crimes are propelled solely by passion—by self-regard, greed and hatred—and pay no heed, Hegel noted, to “order and moderation, justice and morality.” [1] The imperialist assault on Iraq—which began with the First Gulf War, reached a peak with “shock and awe” attacks launched by U.S./U.K military forces in 2003, and continues today, nearly twenty years later—offers a horrendous example of unrestrained evil spread across a titanic canvas.

Abdul-Haq Al-Ani’s and Joanne Baker’s indispensable book spotlights the appalling criminal enterprise now working itself out in Iraq: Deliberate contamination of the Iraqi nation, its peoples, and natural environment with radiation from previously unheard of weapons of mass destruction—deadly implements of war fashioned from a practically inexhaustible global garbage dump of depleted uranium (DU).

Grisly newspaper photographs and televised images of the “Highway of Death” revealed in late February 1991 desert vistas of burnt-out, twisted Iraqi civilian and military vehicles destroyed in cold blood by US air strikes during Saddam Hussein’s hasty exit from Kuwait. Surely the world will be repelled by such savagery, many thought at the time. Surely these pictures alone will push popular sentiment against war, and propel combatants toward peace? But the cavalcade of cruelty on the road from Kuwait to Basra signaled just the beginning of a crusade that would unfold for most of the next two decades. And no photograph, no television video, nor even the senses of sight, taste, feeling and smell of witnesses on the ground could have revealed the secret corruption of those searing images, the deadly radioactive and toxic refuse emitted in clouds of invisible vapour from fired US missiles, shells and other armaments composed of DU that will contaminate the Gulf area for a millennium.

George H.W. Bush’s 1988 declaration that Saddam Hussein was “worse than Hitler” inaugurated a successful propaganda offensive vilifying the Iraqi people. The cumulum against Iraq now extends to its inability to seek protection from radioactive and chemical poisoning by DU, or indeed to carry out and publicize scientific research on dangers presented to humans and animals by DU contamination. As documented in this book, US/UK governments treat DU deposits with serious concern, but only as regards their own territory and citizens. The people of Iraq have become a giant experimental colony for measuring the hazards of ionized radiation and toxicity associated with reckless deployment of DU.

From a purely military point of view, DU is highly cost-effective. [2] DU is a radioactive waste product generated by nuclear reactors and the manufacture of nuclear weapons. Suppliers are anxious to get it off their hands since gratis procurement by the military is a desirable alternative to prohibitively expensive, safe disposal of “nuclear tailings”. Just as chemically toxic as lead, DU is almost twice as heavy and much harder. DU is self-sharpening: DU bores through very tough materials while gaining ability to penetrate. DU at high velocity sears through hard targets such as tank armor and emerges on the other side with intense fire and deathly gases. As this book documents, over 2000 tons of burnt, pulverized and exploded DU have been scattered over Iraq by US/UK armed forces since 1991.

Beginning in 1991 the world stood by while western imperialism enforced a total blockade on Iraq: the first time in modern history that a nation has been entirely cut off from external trade and communications. Only barbaric sieges dating from the Middle Ages offer anything like the spectacle of suffering in Iraq. Even scholarly and scientific discourse fell victim. Without a murmur of dissent from the global community, imperialism barred Iraqi researchers and writers not only from vital materials required for research but also from international sources of scientific discovery and dissemination.

Abdul-Haq Al-Ani and Joanne Baker offer in this book an initial scientific reckoning of DU despoliation from behind the uranium curtain. [3] The authors do not suggest that the poor state of health of the Iraqi people arises entirely from DU contamination. There are plenty of reasons for the massive increase in disease, including cancer and birth deformities, among Iraqis. US/UK imperialism destroyed the social infrastructure of the country, including water treatment plants, electric power installations, food markets, hospitals and schools. Uncontrolled oil fires polluted the air. Assaulted by malnutrition and infected water sources, the immunological systems of many Iraqi children have collapsed. Even the farcical trial and diabolical murder of Saddam Hussein did not satisfy western invaders. After the Iraqi leader’s removal, the embargo remained and infrastructure deteriorated even further. Pre-war Iraq enjoyed the professional services of 34,000 registered doctors. By 2006, 20,000 physicians had fled; 2000 of the remainder had been killed, and 250 kidnapped. By 2007, 8 million Iraqis required emergency aid and over half the population of 22 million suffered absolute poverty. The Red Cross reported last year that the humanitarian situation in Iraq was among the most critical on the globe.

Apologists talk about a “failure” of American and British policy in Iraq, the occupiers’ inability to construct a stable democratic system to replace the Ba’athist order under Hussein. [4] But peace and security were never on the order paper for US/UK militarism. Its job was to loot, divide, desecrate and cripple Iraq to ensure the country would never again thumb its nose at the western imperium.

According to the 1948 Convention on the Prevention of Genocide, the crime of genocide involves acts committed with intent to destroy a national, ethnical, racial or religious group. These acts include killing members of the group, causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group, and inflicting conditions calculated to destroy the group in whole or part. The authors present compelling evidence that the occupying powers’ indiscriminate use of DU in Iraq, along with the affects of blockade and invasion, conform to these elements of the definition of genocide.

This book includes the results of controlled studies by Iraqi scientists of the relation between

the presence of DU, ionizing radiation, and malignant disease rates carried out under extremely adverse conditions 7-10 years after the 1991 assault. These epidemiological studies and measures of high radiation are necessarily rudimentary and incomplete. Yet combined with documented reports of birth defects and cancer related to radiation exposure since the 2003 invasion (including a marked increase in breast cancer among Iraqi women), these pioneering investigations present an extremely disturbing picture. Alarming evidence revealed by the authors of this book constitutes a strong case that US/UK invaders committed genocide in Iraq through indiscriminate employment of DU-armed weaponry.

Notes

1. Lectures on the Philosophy of World History. Introduction: Reason in History. Trans. H.B. Nisbet. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975, p. 21.
2. For a useful summary of the issues surrounding DU see Rob White, "Depleted Uranium, state crime and the politics of knowing." Theoretical Criminology. Vol. 12(1):31-54, 2008.
3. The US Atomic Energy Commission detonated the first deliverable hydrogen bomb in 1954 in the Marshall Islands, code-named "Bravo". Deadly radiation from the gargantuan nuclear fireball fell upon island residents, US scientists and armed forces personnel. The Eisenhower administration tried unsuccessfully to block news of the disaster. Critics dubbed the US cover up, "the uranium curtain." Shane Maddock, "The Fourth Country Problem: Eisenhower's Nuclear Nonproliferation Policy," Presidential Studies Quarterly; Summer 1998; 28, 3, p. 555.
4. E.g., Daniel Byman, "An Autopsy of the Iraq Debacle: Policy Failure or Bridge Too Far?" Security Studies, 17: 599-643, 2008.

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