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America's Grim Legacy in Iraq

Depleted uranium is used to harden bullets and mortar shells

By John Tirman

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The Iraq War is now eleven years old, still tearing up the country but no longer with the assistance of U.S. troops. Between 500,000 and 700,000 people died in 2003-2011. The monthly civilian toll now is as high as it's been since 2008. It is a riven country, at odds with itself,

fending off jihadists from Syria, morally and physically drained by more than twenty years of war (starting with Operation Desert Storm in 1991) and crippling sanctions.

And that's not all. We now know, thanks to the courageous efforts of several researchers, that environmental toxins have likely poisoned the country, toxins that are also due to the U.S.-instigated war. The munitions the United States used in Desert Storm and Operation Iraqi Freedom are the apparent culprits, and, like the grim Agent Orange legacy in Vietnam, controversy and denial animate much of the discussion.

Two agents are at issue. One is depleted uranium, which is used to harden bullets and mortar shells to enable them to more easily penetrate the target. Depleted uranium (DU) is slightly radioactive and harmful if inhaled, though the extent of this hazard is unclear and most studies discount widespread impacts. The most likely effect is chemical (rather than radiological), and affects kidneys, according to studies conducted in manufacturing DU applications. Other metals used in munitions could have similar effects.

A second candidate is white phosphorous (WP), which was used extensively in Fallujah and possibly elsewhere by U.S. forces to light up a field of battle and as an incendiary. A known carcinogen, the army called its use of WP "shake and bake." A shell containing WP could burn toxic smoke for 15 minutes. Israel also used WP extensively in its assault on Gaza in 2008-09, but said last year it would no longer use the agent.

These, among other toxic materials, have largely been ignored in the aftermath of the war, a war that Americans have largely buried mentally. But epidemiological studies have raised the distinct possibility that such agents have taken a sizable human toll, particularly in Fallujah and other places of intense fighting.

One such peer-reviewed study by molecular biologists in 2010 found high rates of birth defects among Iraqis in Fallujah, indeed "the highest rate of genetic damage in any population ever studied," according to the lead author. That's a pretty stunning conclusion. Another scientific study found that "since 2003, congenital malformations have increased to account for 15% of all births in Fallujah, Iraq. Congenital heart defects have the highest incidence, followed by neural tube defects. Similar birth defects were reported in other populations exposed to war contaminants."

A leading suspect for these effects is depleted uranium, though many official bodies, including the World Health Organization, assert that based on most studies DU is not enough of a hazard to explain birth defects. A comprehensive report issued by a coalition of activists seeking to ban DU responds that studies have not been done in enough war zones to understand the dynamic effects of the weapons and the environment—certainly a plausible perspective. The subject deserves considerably more study—independent study—to get a satisfying answer, because there's no indication that the U.S. military will not use DU or WP weapons in the future. (Neither is classified as chemical weapons, though a case could be made that they should be.) It defies logic that there are no effects from these contaminants when the high levels of "genetic damage" are coincident with the conduct of the U.S. war.

The military's rote response in most cases of wrongdoing is denial. Remarkably, the American people and their political leaders are in denial about the impacts of the Iraq War as well. Many

news media elites insist that war mortality is no more than 100,000, and there's little attention to the millions of Iraqis displaced from their homes by the war. That the shattered society earns little heed today is no surprise—it's a misadventure everyone wants to forget.

But the mothers with malformed babies and high rates of infant pathologies are grim reminders of our legacy. It happens in all "our" wars, leaving a legacy of the uncaring bully. We should be better than that.