

By Marsha B. Cohen

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A grim joke made the rounds in late 2002 and early 2003, in the lead-up to the US invasion of Iraq. The version I recall went something like this:

President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney go into a Texas bar. Over a couple of beers they plan the invasion of Iraq, taking out Saddam Hussein and taking control of Iraq's vast oil reserves. The big question, though, is how Americans might react to their starting another war, with victory still elusive in Afghanistan. They decide to do an impromptu sampling of public opinion, and invite an average, all-American looking guy standing at the bar to join them for a friendly drink.

"What would you think of us invading Iraq and taking over their oil fields, if you knew that 30,000 Iraqis and one American bicycle mechanic would be killed if we do it?" Bush asks.

The fellow slowly sips his beer, his brow furrowed. He mulls the question and looks troubled. Finally he asks, "Why should an American bicycle mechanic have to die?"

Cheney slaps the table and grins triumphantly at Bush. "I told you no one would give a damn about the 30,000 Iraqis!"

A decade later, no one seems to give a damn about Iranian lives either.

**The U.S. legacy in Iraq**

As we now know, far more than 30,000 Iraqis and one American have died since the US invasion of Iraq on March 19, 2003. The number of documented Iraqi civilian deaths from violence since the onset of the “Second Iraq War” now totals between 105,000-115,000, according to the continuously updated [Iraq Body Count database](#). It also notes that according to the *WikiLeaks Iraq war logs*, the figure may be 13,750 higher still. Official Department of Defense statistics as of mid-December, as compiled by [Margaret Griffis at Antiwar.com](#), reveal that 4484 members of the US military deaths and 1487 private military contractors have lost their lives since the war began, as well as 319 “Coalition” troops, 348 journalists and 448 academics. Estimates of the number of Americans wounded range from an official count of 33,000 to estimates of over 100,000.

Iraqi physicians are seeing an upsurge in cancers and birth defects, which they blame on the usage of depleted uranium in the shells and bombs used by US and British forces in the 1991 Iraq war and the 2003 invasion. An [estimated 300 tons of depleted uranium](#) were used to attack Iraq in the First Gulf War. Abdulhaq Al-Ani, co-author of [Uranium in Iraq: The Poisonous Legacy of the Iraq Wars](#), has been researching the health effects of depleted uranium weaponry on Iraq’s civilian population since 1991 and explained in an [interview with Al Jazeera](#) that the effects of depleted uranium on the human body don’t even begin to manifest until 5-6 years after exposure. Al-Ani points to a spike in Iraqi cancer rates in Iraq in 1996-1997 and 2008-2009.

Dr. Ahmad Hardan, who has served as a special scientific adviser to the World Health Organization, the United Nations and the Iraqi Health Ministry, has been monitoring the effects of depleted uranium exposure on adults and children, which include multiple cancers and serious birth defects. [He told reporter Lawrence Smallman](#) that “Depleted uranium has a half life of 4.7 billion years and that means thousands upon thousands of Iraqi children will suffer for tens of thousands of years to come.” Leukemia has become the third most common cancer throughout Iraq, with children under 15 especially vulnerable. “This is what I call terrorism,” he said.

The BBC [reports](#) that babies born in Fallujah now have 13 times the rate of congenital heart deformities than European-born infants. While visiting Iraq, World Affairs editor John Simpson

was told many times that women in Fallujah have been advised not to bear children. The director of the Afghan Depleted Uranium and Recovery Fund, Dr. Daud Miraki, [has found](#)

that increasing numbers of infants in eastern and southeastern Afghanistan are being born without eyes or limbs, and have tumors protruding from their mouths and eyes.

[The Pentagon denies any connection](#)

with the US military's use of depleted uranium, even though (or perhaps because) these same effects are

[endangering veterans](#)

returning to the US from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Nevertheless, whether from the right, left or the center, the potential "consequences" of military strikes (a euphemism for war) against Iran are being assessed almost exclusively on the basis of the potential impact on Israel, the US and Europe: a spike in the price of oil wreaking havoc in the global economy—Hezbollah launching missile strikes from Lebanon into Israel and carrying out acts of terrorism against "soft western targets"—rather than the disastrous consequences for Iran, its neighbors and the global ecosystem.

One exception is a 114 page "[Study on a Possible Israeli Strike on Iran's Nuclear Development Facilities](#)", produced in 2009 for the Center for International and Strategic Studies. It devotes all of two pages (90-91) to the human and environmental human catastrophe that would result just from an attack on the Iranian nuclear power plant in Bushehr:

Any strike on the Bushehr Nuclear Reactor will cause the immediate death of thousands of people living in or adjacent to the site, and thousands of subsequent cancer deaths or even up to hundreds of thousands depending on the population density along the contamination plume.

The authors also warn that "Bahrain, Qatar and the UAE will be heavily affected by the radionuclides." (Are the Arab states of the Gulf who supposedly are so eager for Israel to contain Iran's regional ambitions aware of this?)

The ever-smirking Israeli Minister of Defense, Ehud Barak, has calculated that the [casualties of a war with Iran](#) could be limited to fewer than 500. "There won't be 100,000 dead, not 10,000 dead nor 1,000 dead. Israel will not be destroyed,"

#### [Barak said](#)

reassuringly during a November radio interview quoted by the

#### [Washington Post](#)

. “If everyone just goes into their houses, there won’t be 500 dead, either,” he said.

Barak means Israelis. As for Iranians, who’s counting? Who cares?

### The human cost of attacking Iran

No one is talking about the harm that “surgical air strikes” against “suspected Iranian nuclear facilities” with GBU-28 “bunker-buster” bombs, which derive their ability to penetrate concrete and earth from [depleted uranium](#), would inflict on 74 million Iranians, nearly a quarter of whom are under the age of 14 and under and half of whom are under the age of 30. (Where are those self-designated “pro-life” voices that should be expressing outrage? Or does “the right to life” evaporate as soon as a fetus exits the womb?)

No worries are being expressed about the release of radioactive materials into the biosphere of Central Asia (and by eventual extension, the entire earth). If the depleted uranium in the bombs comes into contact with radioactive nuclear materials present in the targeted nuclear research sites—nearly all of which operate under International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) supervision—the potential for disaster would be magnified exponentially.

Israeli Military Intelligence Chief Major General Aviv Kochavi grimly [told the hawkish Herzliya Conference](#) recently that Iran possesses more than 4 tons of low-grade enriched uranium as well as almost 100 kilograms of uranium enriched at 20%. If true, is it really a good idea to send these radioactive materials spewing into the air and water of Central Asia and beyond? Is it any wonder that Russia, China and India—all whom are much closer geographically to Iran, as well as downwind of [the direction in which radiation and toxin-tainted winds would initially blow](#)—are the UN Security Council members most opposed to attacking Iran?

Nor is anyone questioning the wisdom of dropping unprecedented numbers of 5000 lb. “bunker busters” [capable of penetrating 100 feet of earth or 20 feet of concrete](#) into the bowels of an

already earthquake-prone region. No one seems to care about the irreparable and uncontrollable environmental damage that could be done to miles of Iranian coastline: the adjacent Caspian Sea to the north, the Arabian Sea to the south, and the Persian Gulf to the west. What about the permanent damage to the underground aquifers of Central Asia, where [water is already scarce](#)

? If

[fracking for natural gas can render US drinking water flammable](#)

, imagine what pounding some of the most plentiful natural gas fields with bombs could do.

### The unforeseeable consequences

Prognosticating the full extent of the damage that could and would be inflicted upon Iran and upon Iranians is difficult to impossible. No one outside of top security circles can even guess the number of targets of an Israeli and/or US attack (the [BBC suggests five](#) in addition to Bushehr). Other variables include the quantity or capacity of the weaponry that would be employed, whether

[Israel plans on using nuclear weapons](#)

, whether so-called “precision surgical strikes” reached or missed their intended targets, all of which would affect the

[scale of “collateral damage”](#)

to human beings, infrastructure, homes and apartments, schools, mosques and

[World Heritage sites](#)

as a consequence of “bomb-bomb-bombing” Iran’s suspected nuclear research facilities.

Almost assuredly an attack on facilities buried deep within the earth would utilize [“bunker busting” guided bomb units](#)

(GBUs) that gain their power to penetrate from

[depleted uranium](#)

. The cost in lives, injuries, and long-term dangers to the health of civilians, including genetic damage to unborn future generations from toxins and radioactive materials in the depleted uranium bombs dropped and nuclear materials leaked is also incalculable.

### Is war worth it?

Contrary to misleading media reports, there is [no evidence that Iran is presently attempting or even planning to build a bomb](#). But even if there

were, an Israeli and/or US attack would merely [postpone its development](#) for a few years, and perhaps even spur and speed up nuclear weapons research for deterrence.

Returning to public opinion polling, a recent [Pew Research Center telephone survey](#) (Feb. 8-12) asked a sampling of 1500 adults in all 50 states, “How much, if anything, have you read or heard about the dispute over Iran’s nuclear program?”

**38% said “A lot”**

**39% said “A little”**

**23% said “Nothing at all”**

Yet asked whether it was more important “to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons, even if it means taking military action” or “to avoid a military conflict with Iran even if it means they may develop nuclear weapons,” 30% of respondents prioritized avoiding a military conflict, while 58% said military action might be necessary (20% more than the number who had said they “knew a lot” about the dispute over Iran’s nuclear program). This isn’t a fluke: the same Pew survey asking the same question of different respondents Sept. 30-Oct. 4, 2009 found that only 41% said they “knew a lot” while 61% would approve of military action—the same 20% differential.

(In the most recent survey, respondents were also asked whether the US should support or oppose an attack on Iran by Israel “to stop its nuclear weapons program.” 39% said the US should support Israeli military action, 5% said the US should oppose Israeli military action, and just over half (51%) said the US should “stay neutral.”)

But what if the questions were framed differently? What if the pollster were to ask, “Would you approve or disapprove of Israel or the US delaying progress in Iranian nuclear research (not necessarily in pursuit of a nuclear weapon) by 3-5 years at most, by dropping spent uranium

bunker-busting bombs on a country of 74 million people, a quarter of them younger than 14, if tens or even hundreds of thousands might die and perhaps millions more might suffer from genetic damage causing birth defects and cancers for generations to come?

And what if the follow-up question was, “If depleted uranium bunker busters were unable to penetrate Iranian underground facilities where nuclear research was allegedly taking place, much of it under the supervision of the IAEA, would you approve of Israel using nuclear weapons that would magnify death and destruction a hundredfold and result in what some might call ‘a holocaust’?”

Frankly, I have no idea what the pro and con percentages would be to questions asked in this way. But it's time for the pollsters gauging public opinion to speak more forthrightly about what the real options—and the real consequences—of attacking Iran are. They can start by shedding the sanitized references to “military action” and “surgical strikes” and calling them what they are—acts of war that will inflict death and destruction on tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, of Iranians. Iranians like the characters in the [Oscar-winning film “A Separation,”](#) who love their children and want the best for them, who worry about their aging parents, who struggle to make ends meet in the face of high unemployment and economic stress. As the film's director [Asghar Farhadi stated](#) in his acceptance speech for 2011's Best Foreign Language Film:

At a time of talk of war, intimidation and aggression is exchanged between politicians, the name of their country, Iran, is spoken here through her glorious culture, a rich and ancient culture that has been hidden under the heavy dust of politics.

Should that heavy dust be poisoned with toxic radioactive contaminants from depleted uranium and perhaps even nuclear fallout? War on Iran is no joke.