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# The Iraq lesson: the attack on "Forward Base Falcon"

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**Iraq is a land of calamities: Saddam Hussein's dictatorship, the Iraq-Iran War from 1980 to 1988, chemical genocide at Halabja, the Gulf War of 1991, uranium contamination, economic sanctions after 1991, invasion in 2003 by a coalition led by G.W.Bush, foreign occupation, terrorism... Yet there is one calamity that seems to have escaped general attention.**

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At the end of 2006, we tried in vain to attract the attention of journalists, of Western opinion (the Arab countries were better informed), of the UN and the IAEA, to an event that occurred in Baghdad. This event was so exceptionally serious that it ought to have led the world news and caused such huge dismay that, perhaps, it might have shortened the Iraq war which continues to this day.

This event was "unheard of" in its extraordinary, unprecedented character, and literally "unheard of" in the sense of being ignored and unknown.

On the evening of 10 October 2006, the largest US base in Iraq, Forward Base Falcon, a 3km long base located in the southern suburbs of Baghdad and intended to accommodate at least 3000 soldiers, was hit by perfectly-targeted bombardments from the Iraqi resistance.

According to Agence France-Presse : *" A munitions depot in a US base in Baghdad was destroyed on Tuesday evening by a mortar attack that started an enormous fire and caused very strong explosions (...) The civilian and military personnel were successfully evacuated from the Falcon base. The fire in the night of Tuesday to Wednesday provoked a series of explosions which shook Baghdad and sowed panic in the Iraqi capital. Iraqi leaders appeared on television to call for calm and forestall rumours of an attack on Baghdad. 'At first we thought they were the usual explosions. We thought the Americans were firing on something. All the same, I went outdoors and I saw the fire in the Base,' declared Abu Sajad, who lives near the Falcon base. 'The explosions became stronger and stronger,' he added, 'my windows were shattered to pieces and there were shells flying all around'."*

The event was enormous: rightly or wrongly, according to several witnesses, it prompted five rotations of military medical aircraft marked with the red cross, it caused more than 300 wounded to be hospitalised, with even a list of names, it did a billion dollars of destruction, according to an Iraqi official who visited the spot the next day... The US army managed to hush up the affair, saying there were only a hundred people present, no wounded, and that the army's capability was unaffected. Afterwards, however, nothing was the same. For the first time, President Bush recognised that Iraq was going the way of Vietnam; one general considered that the USA was in the process of losing the battle of Baghdad; on the ground, attacks increased in intensity; in November, the Republicans lost the mid-term elections and George Bush had to send reinforcements to Iraq...

*In France, nobody was aware.* On October 11, at 2 a.m. the TV channel France 2 gave 13 seconds of its "Night Report" to the subject, taking images from Al-Jazeera. But during that day it broadcast nothing of it. Not a word on France 2 or the other channels. Nothing else in the broadcast media. Nothing in the press either, except on page 6 of Le Monde where, placed inside a story on another matter, were three misleading lines claiming that the cause of the fire was unknown. All the reports spoke of one explosion: the North Korean nuclear test which, by a happy coincidence, had occurred two days earlier, on October 9, an event around which the US agencies tried to build suspense. Perhaps the explosion was not nuclear, after all, although... Perhaps there was a second explosion, in the very night of October 10-11... although in the end...

We were not distracted. The Baghdad explosions were so spectacular and unusual in character that after we had

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understood the detailed reports from the only two Western media agencies to cover the event (the BBC and the AFP), and viewed many times that two videos placed on the internet - one filmed with a zoom-camera by the Qatar-based chain Al-Jazeera, the other filmed by a US soldier from inside the camp (also zoom) - after we had deciphered the very informative sound-track of the latter, seen all that was accessible on the internet in the way of filmed explosions, questioned some "experts", read some Iraqi testimonies broadcast on the net, viewed the satellite images on *GoogleEarth* and examined all that in the light of what we know about atomic weapons... the question raised on *Youtube* by the video taken by the marines seemed to us a genuine important question: *did certain of these explosions result from tactical nukes?* **(1)**

In order to describe the radioactive catastrophe which we suspect occurred, because, as we then said, "*there were certainly depleted uranium munitions there, since the US infantry, cavalry, artillery and air-force are equipped with them*" we wrote in the mode of hypothesis and questioning. These standard precautions merely gave comfort to the indifference and contempt of those people who know things even before being informed and who reject the unusual on the pretext that it differs from the ordinary. French journalists did not show the least curiosity. Only one of them reacted... without even having looked at the videos, he indignantly requested to be removed from our email list. He works for a so-called "investigative" paper.

As for our "abolitionist" friends, they said by way of objection:

[-] that the Americans would not be unwise enough to bring nuclear weapons within range of the Iraqi resistance; whereas the US forces were indeed unwise enough to let their biggest munitions depot be destroyed by a volley of rockets or mortar shells.

[-] that they had no reason to bring nuclear weapons to Baghdad; whereas in 2006 an attack against Iran's nuclear plants was on the drawing-board, with preparations well advanced.

[-] that nuclear weapons are totally separate from all other weapons; whereas the Bush administration's « Nuclear Posture Review » had since 2003 viewed them as battlefield weapons like the rest, and a circular to ground commanders had given force to this new orientation by entrusting them with the decision to use tactical nuclear weapons. **(2)**

[-] that a single nuclear weapon exploding over Baghdad would have destroyed the city: whereas in fact the US arsenal has long contained a complete range of nuclear weapons, including (from as early as the 1960s) *mini-nukes* with a power equal to a few hundred, even a few dozen tonnes of TNT: the smallest of these, nicknamed « Davy Crockett », was the equivalent of only 10 tonnes of TNT and was, with its launching tube, transportable by infantry soldiers. Its nuclear warhead was a MK54.

Another example is the W-48 artillery shell. With a diameter of 155 mm, a length of 33.3 inches, and a weight varying from 118 to 128 pounds, it has a power equivalent to 72 tonnes of TNT. It explodes by a delay mechanism, or on impact, or *as a result of a proximity airburst*. Over a thousand of these were produced and then all withdrawn from service in 1992, but without being destroyed. We have no proof that this type of weapon was not redeployed in the context of the Bush-Cheney strategy. If they were redeployed, then the US Army communiqué saying that munitions and shells had exploded at Forward Base Falcon merely neglected to say that some of the shells were nuclear ones. Nor is it out of the questions that some bombs were stored at FBF with a view to use by the US Air Force. In 2006 some 600 *tactical nuclear bombs* were in service (B61s or MK61s). The power of these bombs varies from model to model, rising from 300 tonnes (equivalent TNT) to 150 kilotonnes. In total the USA has produced some twenty different models of atomic explosives with power largely under one kilotonne.

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There is therefore nothing absurd in saying that some US tactical nuclear weapons of limited power could have been located in the wrong place at the wrong time. But the objections were made so as to exorcise an unthinkable possibility: that US atomic bombs could have exploded again over a city at war, as they did over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. If that did indeed occur, then the Americans are responsible, even if they did not cause or desire the explosions: responsible for having brought these bombs into a theatre of war with the intention of using them if they felt the need. *That is unthinkable!* So you must not think it...

Many objections were made to us, yet people failed to observe the undoubtedly surprising facts: a series of explosions (at least 9 in an 8-minute video) of great power, great luminosity (flash), striking form (fireball, "mushroom"), incendiary effect and blast (at 1.5 km distant, the GI filming from inside a bunker - as his sound-track tells us - was nearly knocked over by the first explosion). But only the radioactive effect could attest to the presence of fissile materials of military origin (U235, Plutonium) - or of depleted uranium.

An official investigation seemed to us absolutely called for. We requested one on 27 December 2006 by sending simultaneous letters to the two UN secretary-generals (the outgoing one, Kofi Annan, and his successor, Ban Ki-moon) and to the director of the IAEA Mohammed El-Baradei. **(3)**

Our request was promptly rejected: in the first days of 2007, even before receiving our registered letter, the UN's deputy secretary-general in charge of disarmament questions, reacting to our fax, informed us that the UN knew nothing of the event - and made no mention of any investigation. Two months later an official of the IAEA informed us that the subject fell outside the competence of this UN agency, which nevertheless is supposed to be concerned with "atomic energy", to be a watchdog against its military uses... and had been mandated to inspect Iraq ... when Saddam Hussein was in power there. Derisively it seems, we were suggested that we should approach the authorities in Baghdad. At the time, however, these depended entirely for their survival on their American "ally" and could not easily risk raising a question which would displease the USA.

We resolved to continue the investigation by our own means, though these were pathetically small. A long chain of solidarity, most of whose links remained unknown to us, was set up to bring us, from Iraq, a sample of a used air-filter from Baghdad. It took months before finally, in October 2007, it reached an independent French laboratory capable of analysing it by Gamma spectrometry: the CRIIRAD lab. This laboratory detected natural radionuclides: the Pb 210 (in the uranium 238 chain) that results from the disintegration of Thoron; but also traces of an artificial radionuclide, Cesium 137. This, however, could have various origins: Chernobyl fallout, fallout of atmospheric nuclear tests conducted since 1945... take your pick.

The CRIIRAD did not detect uranium, but that does not mean there was none. Unable to analyse further, they entrusted another part of the sample - with our consent - to a better-equipped laboratory: SUBATECH, the Laboratory of Subatomic Physics and Associated Technologies at the School of Mines in Nantes, which proceeded to do a blind analysis of the Alpha spectrometry. No detectable presence of Plutonium was found. But this time traces of Uranium 234, 235 and 238 were found. They may come from natural uranium. These results are not considered sufficiently conclusive by Bruno Chareyron, CRIIRAD's engineer. He tells us that the analysis should be resumed with new costs and a broader sampling plan... But that is beyond the means of ACDN: none of us has the time or means to go to Iraq. The last analysis alone cost us 500 euros, which is half our reserves. Compare this with the level of the smallest contracts between Boeing and the US Air Force to develop the SDB1: 18.5 million dollars, 80 million dollars... or for the entire SDB1 programme 4.25 billion dollars as estimated in 2005. Sure, the arms merchants and their opponents are not playing in the same league.

In January 2008, 16 months had passed after the Baghdad event. The whole affair had never existed for Western opinion, not even for the "nuclear disarmament specialists".

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Bruno Chareyron then suggested interviewing some eye-witnesses, some former soldiers. That is what we had already done by internet. During our investigation, in fact, some US veterans who had been at Forward Base Falcon sent us their testimonies through a reliable friend. They spoke briefly - not elaborating, since they were afraid - but categorically: yes, there were indeed Depleted Uranium weapons stocked there, and they did explode. That probably explains the flaming brands that can be seen spurting up in the videos of some explosions. That explains above all the haste in which the terrain where the fire had raged was completely cleared and raked.

Since that time two vast zones of the base, scraped down to the substratum, one in the south, the other in the north (this one in particular, being the site of the major explosions), have stayed definitively empty. Today, two and a half years later, the denuded subsoil of Forward Base Falcon still shows as a white spot on the satellite images accessible on GoogleEarth.

It's as if that place was accursed. Is that the fate that awaits some parts of the Gaza Strip, which is already so cramped?

We will perhaps never know - unless some journalists more curious than the rest latch onto the case, or the US Army declassifies its dossier - what different types of weapons were stocked at Forward Base Falcon and exploded on the night of 10-11 October 2006. But we know at least, through unofficial witness reports that have reached us, that depleted uranium was indeed consumed in the fires and thus did add to the DU that had entered the environment in the bombings of 1991 and 2003.

So the inhabitants of Baghdad will go on inhaling a few more radioactive particles, surrounded -despite the worries expressed by one woman, Dr Mishkat Al Moumin, who was the first Iraqi Minister of Environment- by general silence and indifference.(4)

**ACDN, 27 May 2009**

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### Notes

(1) See [US Disaster at Forward Base Falcon in Baghdad](#)

The links are to the videos quoted here.

(2) Note that the US forces were accused of having used in 2003 at least one if not several neutron bombs (thermonuclear bombs) during the battle of Baghdad in order to extricate themselves when surrounded by the elite troops of Saddam's regime.

See [Les Etats-Unis accusés d'avoir utilisé au moins une bombe à neutrons \(thermonucléaire\) lors de la Bataille de Bagdad en 2003](#)

And : <http://www.uruknet.info/?p=32014>

(3) Letter to Ban Ki-Moon, 27 Dec. 2006. See : [Baghdad under nukes? We need the truth!](#)

(4) On 6th April 2003, when these radioactive DU weapons were being used again in Iraq, we wrote a [letter to President Chirac](#):

*"In the "War of Liberation" which they claim they are waging, the Americans must not behave like the evil dictators of past and present, or else they will become unacceptable allies and will incite terrorists to mass atrocities that will make 11 September 2001 appear just a modest foretaste.*

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*"All the more reason for France to do all she can to stop the Crime against Humanity currently under way: the use of Depleted Uranium munitions by the forces of the US and UK, as has been admitted at least at Bassora and is almost certainly occurring in other battle-zones. Since the 1991 Gulf War, the various components of Depleted Uranium have caused a humanitarian catastrophe which Western leaders have systematically underestimated or denied (France is included, since the French soldiers suffering from "Gulf War syndrome" have been denied their rights, as were the veterans of French nuclear testing). Billions of radioactive particles created by Depleted Uranium impacts will transform Iraq into a land forever uninhabitable, and will be dispersed over all the Northern Hemisphere where they will add to background radiation and increase the "anonymous" statistics of cancer victims. What's the point of launching a "Nationwide Campaign against Cancer" if we fail to intervene in time to stop the expansion of a major cause of cancer?"*

*"In addition, France must announce its intention to honour the undertaking the five nuclear-weapons states in the Non-proliferation Treaty made on 19 May 2000, when they promised to eliminate their nuclear arms - weapons whose use would constitute another crime against humanity."*

***"Mister President, you are a humanist. In the name of France you must act!"***

No reply was received to this letter.