

## Bad Chemistry, Toxic Horror, and Haunting Consequences

by Margaret Sarfehjooy

Iran suffered the devastating consequences of eight years of war with Iraq and was the first country in the world to experience extensive chemical weapons attacks after the First World War. That terrible suffering gave us a new understanding of the cruelty of war, the terror of weapons of mass destruction, and the importance of peace. Until the day when all people on Earth can live in peace, we will continuously send messages of peace to the world.<sup>1</sup>

As I read this inscription on a plaque at the Tehran Peace Museum, my welcoming and knowledgeable guide, Elaheh, led me through the various exhibits that highlighted the horrors suffered by Iranians from Saddam's chemical weapons attacks during the Iran-Iraq War. One display showed the multitude of medications needed for the victims who are still suffering—medications that are now difficult to obtain because of U.S.-imposed sanctions.

The Iran-Iraq War began in September 1980 when Iraq invaded Iran. During this war, chemical weapons used by Saddam Hussein killed and injured tens of thousands of Iranians, and even Iraqis.

According to the Society for Chemical Weapons Victims Support, about one million Iranian soldiers and civilians were exposed to chemical weapons and at least 100,000 were hospitalized because of severe injuries. The majority of those who survived developed long-term health effects including blood, lung, and skin complications. Currently, over 65,000 survivors suffer from exposure-related illnesses and seek medical treatment regularly. Many are still hospitalized with severe, chronic conditions.<sup>2</sup>



*Dr. Frankenstein studies the chemical processes that led to the creation of a monster in a 1931 Universal Studio horror film based on the classic novel by Mary Shelley.*

As I looked at more displays, including children's artwork for peace, my guide described the workshops and conferences the Peace Museum hosts on the culture of peace, reconciliation, international humanitarian law, disarmament, and peace advocacy. One of the main goals of the Tehran Peace Museum is to raise awareness about the consequences of war to prevent a repeat of such disasters as those suffered by Iranians as a result of Saddam's chemical weapons.

The U.S. (and other countries) played a key role in Saddam's chemical weapons program. As The Washington Post's Bob Woodward reported in 1982, the CIA began giving Iraq intelligence which it used to "calibrate" its mustard gas attacks against Iranian troops.<sup>3</sup> Death from mustard gas is gruesome; so is survival. It hideously disfigures skin, sears lungs and mucous membranes, and often blinds. There is no antidote. According to the New York Times, large quantities of thiodiglycol (used to make mustard gas) were shipped to Iraq from Alcolac International of Baltimore and Nu Kraft Mercantile Corp, Brooklyn.<sup>4</sup> A 1994 U.S. Senate report revealed that U.S. companies were licensed by the Commerce Department to export a witch's

brew of biological and chemical materials, including bacillus anthracis (which causes anthrax) and clostridium botulinum (the source of botulism).<sup>5</sup>

Fully aware that Saddam was using chemical weapons against Iran, presidential envoy Donald Rumsfeld met with Saddam in 1983 to pave the way to normalize U.S.-Iraqi relations, thus ensuring that the shipments from the U.S. (and the Iran/Iraq War) would continue. As far as the U.S. and Israel were concerned, prolonging the war was in their “best interests”—two unlikable regimes were destroying each other. In 1985, Reagan began to supply Iran with weapons systems, delivered by the Israelis. This was the root of the Iran-Contra Affair. Henry Kissinger said, “I hope they kill each other. Too bad they can’t both lose.”<sup>6</sup>

The war finally ended after eight years with Resolution 598, a U.N.-brokered ceasefire that was accepted by both sides. More than one million people were dead and both countries deeply scarred. It is important to note that Iran did not use chemical weapons against Iraq and has never used chemical weapons. By the mid-1990s, significant quantities of Iraq’s nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons programs had been destroyed or rendered harmless under UN supervision. However, the use of chemical weapons in war did not end. Enter the U.S.



*Two young girls look at children’s drawings created to convey the message: “Peace and Friendship for all the people around the world.”*

*Photo: Erfan Eskamaei*

Not only did the US aid the use of chemical weapons by Iraq during the Iran/Iraq war, it also used depleted-uranium (DU) ammunition on a large scale during its 1991 and 2003 invasions of Iraq. The use of DU by the U.S. has not only been the cause of many cases of Gulf War syndrome suffered by U.S. veterans, but also of thousands of instances of birth defects, cancer, and other diseases—causing a large-scale public health disaster and the highest rate of genetic damage in any population

ever studied—suffered by Iraqis in areas subjected to frequent and intense attacks by U.S. and allied occupation forces.<sup>7</sup>

U.S. bombs filled with depleted uranium used against people in Iraq are now beginning to show their harmful effects on the health of Iranians. Dust particles that carry toxic depleted uranium are finding their way into southwestern Iran from neighboring Iraq. Many Iranians in the region are now suffering from eye infections, chronic lung and chest pains, and other illnesses.<sup>8</sup>

The U.S. military used white phosphorus, a chemical compound whose use in civilian areas constitutes a war crime, during its 2004 attacks on Fallujah in Iraq, just as Israel dropped white phosphorus (made in the U.S.) on civilian areas in its 2008-2009 massacre in Gaza.<sup>9</sup> White phosphorus is a horrific incendiary chemical weapon that melts human flesh right down to the bone.

When Will the U.S Be Rid of Chemical Weapons?

The United States has still not destroyed all of its massive supply of deadly nerve agents. As a ratifier of the Chemical Weapons Convention treaty, the U.S. agreed in 1997 to destroy its chemical weapons stocks within 10 years, with the possibility of a five-year extension. Yet, with the latest possible deadline of 2012 now passed, U.S. officials say that they can't destroy all of their arsenals until 2023.<sup>10</sup>



*Outreach at The Tehran Peace Museum promotes a culture of peace for children, university students and adults.*

*Photo: Erfan Eskamaei*

The U.S. government keeps approximately 2,611 tons of mustard gas in a facility in Colorado, and 524 tons of a spectrum of chemical weapons—including deadly nerve agent sarin—in a facility in Kentucky, despite commitments to have already destroyed its chemical arsenals by now.<sup>11</sup>

The U.S. and Russia are the only two countries in the world known to maintain a stockpile of the deadly smallpox virus. Smallpox has been eliminated from the human population, but Kathleen Sebelius, U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services (who retired in June, 2014), said that it would be premature for the U.S. to destroy its stores of the deadly virus.<sup>12</sup> Leading scientists ask why humanity should keep vials of a deadly virus that it went to such pains to eradicate and which could trigger a horrific epidemic in the event of an accidental release. (Ironically, the only people in history to use smallpox as a weapon are the Americans, who gave blankets laced with smallpox in the 1760s to the Native Americans, killing thousands. This tactic was repeated by the U.S. Army in the Indian Wars of the mid- and late-19th century.)<sup>13</sup>

### U.S. Chemical Weapons and the Biodefense Industry

The hysteria generated by the anthrax-in-our-mailboxes scare in 2001 was a key element in driving us to war with Iraq and created another massive growth industry--“biodefense.” Even though it was discovered that the anthrax attack, the only bio-weapons attack in the U.S., originated in U.S. laboratories, the public was led to believe that the anthrax attacks represented a second wave of Middle East-based terrorism. Backed by \$55 billion, U.S. government policy has caused a massive expansion of high-biosecurity labs and has encouraged universities and private sources to build them.<sup>14</sup>

A New York Times article, “Safety Rules Can’t Keep Up with the Biotech Industry,” reported: Whether handling deadly pathogens for biowarfare research, harnessing viruses to do humankind’s bidding or genetically transforming cells to give them powers not found in nature, the estimated 232,000 employees in the nation’s most sophisticated biotechnology labs work amid imponderable hazards. And some critics say the modern biolab often has fewer federal safety regulations than a typical blue-collar factory.<sup>15</sup>

While many critics also worry that the creation of deadly pathogens in government-funded “germ labs” will encourage our adversaries to develop similar programs, might this also encourage warmongers in the U.S.? Page 60 of the Project for the New American Century (PNAC) 2000 report states: Advanced forms of biological warfare that can “target” specific genotypes may transform biological warfare from the realm of terror to a politically useful tool.<sup>16</sup> (PNAC was established in 1997 by leading neoconservatives to advocate aggressive U.S. foreign policy.)

With the U.S. history of selling and using chemical weapons, stockpiling deadly viruses, and creating new ones, what is our role, as U.S. citizens, in trying to create a culture of peace? I remember the Tehran Peace Museum and their display of much-needed medications for the victims of chemical warfare, deadly chemicals that the U.S. and their allies supplied, and Iran’s inability to buy these medications because of U.S.-imposed sanctions. Dr. Shahriar Khateri, co-founder of the Tehran Peace

Museum, wrote: My mind goes to the U.S. presidential debates... President Barack Obama and Gov. Mitt Romney were in a race to promise the most “crippling” sanctions on Iran. And all I wish to do is to ask them: Maybe the “international community” has said it is “legal” to cripple a population to this extent. But is it moral? Is it right?<sup>17</sup>

Margaret Sarfehjooy is the co-chair of the WAMM Middle East Committee and serves on the Board of Women Against Military Madness. She recently visited Iran and the Tehran Peace Museum.

#### End Notes

1. Tehran Peace Museum [www.tehranpeacemuseum.org](http://www.tehranpeacemuseum.org)
2. Society for Chemical Weapons Victims Support (SCWVS) [www.scwvs.org](http://www.scwvs.org)
3. Norm Dixon, “[How Reagan Armed Saddam with Chemical Weapons](#),” Counterpunch, June 17, 2004.
4. Michael R. Gordon, “[U.S. Companies Tied to Chemical Sales](#),” The New York Times, January 31, 1989.
5. William Blum, “[U.S. companies sold Iraq the ingredients for a witch’s brew](#),” The Progressive, April, 1998.
6. Yuram Abdullah Weiler, “[Muslims Killing Muslims: How the West has Benefited from Bloodshed](#),” Salem News, June 3, 2013.
7. Mark Levine, “[Syria, Iraq and moral obscenities big and small](#),” Al Jazeera, August 27, 2013.
8. Press TV video, August 2012, video library of [Amzadi.com](http://Amzadi.com).
9. Nima Shirazi, “[Treaty Obligations, War Crimes and Accountability: A Study in American Hypocrisy](#),” Desert Peace, September 1, 2013.
10. Sarah Lazare, “[US Grandstands on Chemical Weapons Treaty While Violating It](#),” Common Dreams, September 12, 2013.
11. Ibid footnote 10
12. James Gallagher, “[Should the US and Russia destroy their smallpox stocks?](#)” BBC News, May 16, 2011.
13. Ellen Ray and William Schaap, Bioterror: Manufacturing Wars the American Way, Ocean Press, 2003. Excerpt in [Third World Traveler](#).
14. Andrew Thibedaus, “[Book Review: Breeding Bio Insecurity and Germs Gone Wild](#),” Council for Responsible Genetics.
15. Andrew Pollack, Duff Wilson, “[Safety Rules Can’t Keep Up With Biotech Industry](#),” New York Times, May 27, 2010.
16. Complete report: [Rebuilding American Defenses](#)
17. Shahriar Khateri, Narges Bajoghli, “[Blisters and Sanctions](#),” Middle East Research and Information Project, November 25, 2012.