GlobalResearch
Center for Research on Globalization

The Shape of a Shadowy Air War in Iraq

By Nick Turse
Global Research, May 26, 2007
TomDispatch 26 May 2007

Region: Middle East & North Africa
Theme: Media Disinformation, US NATO War Agenda
In-depth Report: IRAQ REPORT

Did the U.S. military use cluster bombs in Iraq in 2006 and then lie about it? Does the U.S. military keep the numbers of rockets and cannon rounds fired from its planes and helicopters secret because more Iraqi civilians have died due to their use than any other type of weaponry?

These are just two of the many unanswered questions related to the largely uncovered air war the U.S. military has been waging in Iraq.

What we do know is this: Since the major combat phase of the war ended in April 2003, the U.S. military has dropped at least 59,787 pounds of air-delivered cluster bombs in Iraq — the very type of weapon that Marc Garlasco, the senior military analyst at Human Rights Watch (HRW) calls, "the single greatest risk civilians face with regard to a current weapon that is in use." We also know that, according to expert opinion, rockets and cannon fire from U.S. aircraft may account for most U.S. and coalition-attributed Iraqi civilian deaths and that the Pentagon has restocked hundreds of millions of dollars worth of these weapons in recent years.

Unfortunately, thanks to an utter lack of coverage by the mainstream media, what we don't know about the air war in Iraq so far outweighs what we do know that anything but the most minimal picture of the nature of destruction from the air in that country simply can't be painted. Instead, think of the story of U.S. air power in Iraq as a series of tiny splashes of lurid color on a largely blank canvas.

Cluster Bombs

Even among the least covered aspects of the air war in Iraq, the question of cluster-bomb (CBU) use remains especially shadowy. This is hardly surprising. After all, at a time when many nations are moving toward banning the use of cluster munitions — at a February 2007 conference in Oslo, Norway, 46 of 48 governments represented supported a declaration for a new international treaty and ban on the weapons by 2008 — the U.S. stands with China, Israel, Pakistan, and Russia in opposing new limits of any kind.

Little wonder. The U.S. military has a staggering arsenal of these weapons. According to a recent Human Rights Watch report, the Army holds 88% of the Pentagon's CBU inventory — at least 638.3 million of the cluster bomblets that are stored inside each cluster munition; the Air Force and Navy, according to Department of Defense figures, have 22.2 million and 14.7 million of the bomblets, respectively. And even these numbers are considered undercounts by experts.

A cluster bomb bursts above the ground, releasing hundreds of smaller, deadly submunitions or "bomblets" that increase the weapon's kill radius causing, as Garlasco puts it, "indiscriminate effects." It's a weapon, he notes, that "cannot distinguish between a civilian and a soldier when employed because of its wide coverage area. If you're dropping the weapon and you blow your target up you're also hitting everything within a football field. So to use it in proximity to civilians is inviting a violation of the laws of armed conflict."

Worse yet, U.S. cluster munitions have a high failure rate. A sizeable number of dud bomblets fall to the ground and become *de facto* landmines which, Garlasco points out, are "already banned by most nations on this planet." Garlasco adds: "I don't see how any use of the current U.S. cluster bomb arsenal in proximity to civilian objects can be defended in any way as being legal or legitimate."

In an email message earlier this year, a U.S. Central Command Air Forces (CENTAF) spokesman told this reporter that "there were no instances" of CBU usage in Iraq in 2006. But military documents suggest this might not be the case.

Last year, Titus Peachey of the Mennonite Central Committee — an organization that has studied the use of cluster munitions for more than 30 years — filed a Freedom of Information Act request concerning the U.S. military's use of cluster bombs in Iraq since "major combat operations" officially ended in that country. In their response, the Air Force confirmed that 63 CBU-87 cluster bombs were dropped in Iraq between May 1, 2003 and August 1, 2006. A CENTAF spokesman contacted for confirmation that none of these were dropped on or after January 1, 2006, offered no response. His superior officer, Lt. Col. Johnn Kennedy, the Deputy Director of CENTAF Public Affairs, similarly ignored this reporter's requests for clarification.

These 12,726 BLU-97 bomblets — each CBU-87 contains 202 BLU-97s or "Combined Effects Bombs" (CEBs) which have anti-personnel, anti-tank, and incendiary capabilities or "kill mechanisms" — dropped since May 2003 are, according to statistics provided by Human Rights Watch, in addition to almost two million cluster submunitions used by coalition forces in Iraq in March and April 2003.

Asked about CBU usage by the Air Force in Iraq in 2006, Ali al-Fadhily, an independent Iraqi journalist, commented: "The use of cluster bombs is a sure thing, but it was very difficult to prove because there were no international experts to document it." In the past, however, international experts have actually had a chance to examine some locations where a fraction of the bomblets that coalition forces used have landed.

On a 2004 research trip to Iraq, for instance, Titus Peachey visited numerous sites which had experienced such strikes. At a farm in northern Iraq, he was shown not only impact craters from exploded bomblets on a farmer's property but also unexploded bomblets, by a team from the Mines Advisory Group, a humanitarian organization devoted to landmine and bomb clearance. While "the de-miners expressed frustration that the farmer had planted his field before it had been cleared," Peachey explained that this was a common, if dangerous, practice in such situations. The U.S. used similar ordnance in Laos during the Vietnam War, he pointed out, noting:

> "The villagers of Laos waited more than 20 years for clearance work to get started in their fields and villages. During that time they had no choice but to till soil that was filled with bombs. Otherwise they could not eat. In Iraq, the

> several visits that we made confirmed this very same dynamic. People could not afford to wait until clearance teams made their farms safe for cultivation. They had to take great risks in order to survive."

Evidence of these risks can be found in U.S. military documents. Case in point: a June 2005 internal memorandum from the U.S. Army's 42d Infantry Division which describes how a 15-year old Iraqi boy, working as a shepherd, "was leading the sheep through north Tikrit, near an ammo storage site, when he picked up a UXO [unexploded ordnance] from a cluster bomb. The UXO detonated and he was killed." Asked to pay $3,000 in compensation for the boy's life, the Army granted that his death was "a horrible loss for the claimant," his mother, but concluded that there was "insufficient evidence to indicate that US. Forces caused the death."

Iraqi documents also chronicle the effects of air-delivered cluster munitions. Take a September 2006 report by the Conservation Center of Environment & Reserves, an Iraqi non-governmental organization (NGO), examining alleged violations of the laws of war by U.S. forces during the April 2004 siege of Fallujah. According to its partial list of civilian deaths, at least 53 people were killed by air-launched cluster bombs in the city that April. An analysis of data collected by another Iraqi NGO, the Iraqi Health and Social Care Organization, showed that, between March and June 2006, of 193 war-injured casualties analyzed, 148 (77%) were the result of cluster munitions of unspecified type.

Air War, Iraq: 2006

While cluster bombs remain a point of contention, Air Force officials do acknowledge that U.S. military and coalition aircraft dropped at least 111,000 pounds of other types of bombs on targets in Iraq in 2006. This figure — 177 bombs in all — does not include guided missiles or unguided rockets fired, or cannon rounds expended; nor, according to a CENTAF spokesman, does it take into account the munitions used by some Marine Corps and other coalition fixed-wing aircraft or any Army or Marine Corps helicopter gunships; nor does it include munitions used by the armed helicopters of the many private security contractors flying their own missions in Iraq.

In statistics provided to me, CENTAF reported a total of 10,519 "close air support missions" in Iraq in 2006, during which its aircraft dropped those 177 bombs and fired 52 "Hellfire/Maverick missiles." The Guided Bomb Unit-12, a laser-guided bomb with a 500-pound general purpose warhead — 95 of which were reportedly dropped in 2006 — was the most frequently used bomb in Iraq last year, according to CENTAF. In addition, 67 satellite-guided, 500-pound GBU-38s and 15 2,000-pound GBU-31/32 munitions were also dropped on Iraqi targets in 2006, according to official U.S. figures. There is no independent way, however, to confirm the accuracy of this official count.

Rockets

Rockets, like the 2.75-inch Hydra-70 rocket which can be outfitted with various warheads and fired from either fixed-wing aircraft or most military helicopters, are conspicuously absent from the totals — so as not to "skew the tally and present an inaccurate picture of the air campaign," said a CENTAF spokesman mysteriously. If released, these figures might, however, prove impressive indeed. According to a 2005 press release issued by Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-VT), who helped secure a five-year, $900 million Hydra contract from the Army for

General Dynamics, "the widely used Hydra-70 rocket... has seen extensive use in Afghanistan and Iraq... [and] has become the world's most widely used helicopter-launched weapon system." By this April, $502 million in orders for the Hydra-70 had been placed by the Army since the contract was awarded.

Cannon Rounds

The number of cannon rounds — essentially large caliber "bullets"– fired by CENTAF aircraft is also a closely guarded secret. The official reason given is that "special forces often use aircraft such as the AC-130" gunships, which fire cannon rounds, and "their missions and operations are classified, so therefore these figures are not released." However, an idea of the number of cannon rounds expended by CENTAF aircraft can be gleaned from a description of a single operation on January 28, 2007 when U.S. F-16s and A-10 Thunderbolts not only "dropped more than 3.5 tons of precision munitions," but also fired "1,200 rounds of 20mm and 1,100 rounds of 30mm cannon fire" in a five square mile area near the southern city of Najaf.

A sense of usage levels can also be gathered from a consideration of contracts awarded in recent years. Take the 20mm PGU-28 ammunition used by helicopters like the AH-1 Cobra and fixed-wing aircraft like the F-16. In 2001, the Department of Defense noted that it held approximately eight million PGU-28/B rounds in its inventory. In May 2003, the Army took steps to increase that arsenal by modifying an existing contract with General Dynamics to add 980,064 rounds of 20mm ammunition to 1.3 million rounds already delivered since December 2001.

In February 2004, General Dynamics was awarded an almost $11 million add-on to an already existing contract for an extra 427,000 cannon rounds for the AH-1 Cobra helicopter. In September 2006, General Dynamics was awarded a similar nearly $14 million add-on for yet more 20mm ammunition; and, in April 2007, $22 million for more of the same. That same month, the U.S. Army Sustainment Command issued a "sources sought notice," looking for more arms manufacturers willing to produce six million or more rounds of such ordnance with promises of an "estimated 400% option over 5 years."

Yet, repeated inquiries about cannon rounds fired in Iraq prompted a CENTAF spokesman to emphatically state in an email: "WE DO NOT REPORT CANNON ROUNDS." Lt. Col. Johnn Kennedy followed up, noting, "Glad to see you appreciate the tremendous efforts [my subordinate] has already expended on you. Trust me, it's probably much more significant than the relentless pursuit of the number of cannon rounds."

But the number of cannon rounds and rockets fired by U.S. aircraft is hardly an insignificant matter. According to Les Roberts, co-author of two surveys of mortality in Iraq published in the British medical journal, *The Lancet*, "Rocket and cannon fire could account for most coalition-attributed civilian deaths." He adds, "I find it disturbing that they will not release this [figure], but even more disturbing that they have not released such information to Congressmen who have requested it."

In 2004, Roberts himself witnessed the destruction caused by cannon fire in Baghdad's vast Shiite slum, Sadr City. He recalls again and again passing through 100-200 meter-wide areas of neighborhoods that had been raked by cannon rounds. "It wasn't one house that was beat up," he recalled. "It would be five, six, seven buildings in a row." Unlike bomb- and artillery-ravaged Ramadi and Fallujah, Roberts noted:

> “There weren’t whole buildings knocked down. There were just big swaths of many, many houses where every window was broken, where there were thousands of pockmarks from cannon fire; not little dents, but huge chunks the size of your fist out of the walls, and lamp-posts bent over because they lost their integrity from being hit so many times.”

This portrait of devastation is echoed in the words of journalist Ali al-Fadhily, who told me that he had witnessed helicopter gunships in action, noting: “The destruction they caused was always immense and casualties so many. They simply destroy the target with every living soul inside. The smell of death comes with those machines.”

While the destructive capacity of helicopter gunships has been well-documented and we have indications of the levels of ammunition available to the military, the actual scale of use is hard to pin down. Flight hours are, however, another indication. According to James Glantz of the New York Times, Army helicopters logged 240,000 flight hours in Iraq in 2005, 334,000 in 2006, and projections for 2007 suggest that the figure will reach 400,000. (And these numbers don’t even include Marine Corps squadrons, heliborne missions by private security contractors, or those of the nascent Iraqi Air Force.)

Top Secret Information

While military press information officers continue to stonewall on the number of cannon rounds fired by helicopters (“We cannot comment on your inquiry due to operational security”), earlier this year Col. Robert A. Fitzgerald, the Marine Corps’ head of aviation plans and policy, was quoted in National Defense Magazine on the subject. He claimed that, in 2006, “Marine rotary-wing aircraft flew more than 60,000 combat flight hours, and fixed-wing platforms completed 31,000. They dropped 80 tons of bombs and fired 80 missiles, 3,532 rockets and more than 2 million rounds of smaller ammunition.” (When asked if Col. Fitzgerald’s admission endangered “operational security,” a military spokesman responded, “I cannot comment on the policies or release authority of a Marine colonel.”)

While Col. Fitzgerald’s statistics presumably also include operations in Afghanistan (where we know U.S. air power has been called upon ever more heavily), they do remind us that the minimalist figures regularly given out by CENTAF hardly offer an accurate picture of the air war in Iraq. When combined with the military’s evasive non-answers, they are also a reminder of what a dearth of information is actually available on even seemingly innocuous matters relating to the air war in Iraq.

For example, from January through April, I posed questions to a Coalition Press Information Center media contact — one “SSG Wiley.” After being rebuffed on the topic of munitions expenditure, I asked, in January, about the total number of “rotary-wing sorties” flown in 2006. The aptly-named Wiley responded that s/he “sent it out to the relevant directorates and [was] awaiting a response…. I will contact you as soon as I get something.” That turned out, despite follow-up, to be never. Following a March 30th query regarding “the relevant directorates,” s/he entreated me, by email, to drop my request for information. Facing the reportorial void, I asked if Wiley would at least provide his/her full name and title for attribution in this article. S/he has yet to respond.

The New Iraqi Air Force

Another little-talked about aspect of the air war is the modest emergence of a new Iraqi Air

Force (IAF). Until the first Gulf War, the Iraqi military had a large air contingent, including hundreds of modern Russian and French combat aircraft. Today, apparently owing to U.S. reluctance to put powerful modern weaponry of any sort in Iraqi hands, the reconstituted IAF is a distinctly less impressive force. Instead of advanced fighters and bombers, they fly SAMA CH-2000 two-seat, single-engine prop airplanes, SB7L-360 Seeker reconnaissance aircraft, a handful of C-130 Hercules turbo-prop cargo planes, and Bell 206 Ranger, UH-1HP "Huey" and Russian Mi-17 helicopters based out of military installations in Baghdad, Basra, Kirkuk, and Taji.

Recently returning from a fact-finding mission in Iraq, undertaken in his capacity as an adjunct professor at the United States Military Academy at West Point, retired U.S. Army Gen. Barry McCaffrey called for sending more aircraft, including 150 helicopters, to the Iraqi security forces. In fact, the IAF recently did take delivery of newly refurbished helicopters at Taji Air Base, is scheduled to receive new aircraft at Kirkuk, and has contracted to add 28 new Mi-17 helicopters in the near future.

The IAF may even be conducting full-scale air strikes of its own sometime soon. As of April 1, 2007, five Iraqi Bell 206 Ranger pilots from its 12th Squadron had already logged more than 188 combat hours. In a recent Air Force Times article, Capt. Shane Werley, the chief American advisor to the IAF's 2d Squadron, asserted that pilots he was working with would, at an unspecified date, "be taking missions from the [Army's] 1st Cavalry [Division at Taji].... The bottom line is we're getting these guys back in the fight."

The Scale of the Carnage

Just a few dogged reporters assigned to the air-power beat might, at least, have offered some sense of the human fall-out of this largely one-sided air war. Since this has not been the case, we must rely on the best available evidence. One valuable source is the national cross-sectional cluster sample survey of mortality in Iraq since the 2003 invasion, published last year in *The Lancet* which used well-established survey methods that have been proven accurate in conflict zones from Kosovo to the Congo. (Interviewers actually inspected death certificates in an overwhelming majority of the Iraqi households surveyed.)

Carried out by epidemiologists at Johns Hopkins University's Bloomberg School of Public Health and Iraqi physicians organized through Mustansiriya University in Baghdad, it estimated 655,000 "excess Iraqi deaths as a consequence of the war." The study also found that, from March 2003 through June 2006, 13% of violent deaths in Iraq were caused by coalition air strikes. If the 655,000 figure, including over 601,000 violent deaths, is accurate, this would equal approximately 78,133 Iraqis killed by bombs, missiles, rockets, or cannon rounds up to last June.

There are also indications that the air war has taken an especially grievous toll on Iraqi children. Figures provided by *The Lancet* study's authors suggest that 50% of all violent deaths of Iraqi children under 15 years of age in that same period were due to coalition air strikes. These findings are echoed by Conservation Center of Environment & Reserves' statistics, indicating that no fewer of 25 of the 59 Iraqis on their partial list of those killed by air strikes during the April 2004 siege of Fallujah were children.

The Iraq Body Count Project (IBC), a group of researchers based in the United Kingdom who maintain a public database of Iraqi civilian deaths resulting from the war, carefully restricts itself to media-documented reports of civilian fatalities. While its figures are consequently

much lower than *The Lancet's* — currently, its tally range stands at: 64,133-70,243 — an analysis of its media-limited data offers a glimpse of the human costs of the air war.

Statistics provided by the Iraq Body Count Project show that from 2003-2006, coalition air strikes, according to media sources alone (which, as we know, have covered the air war poorly), killed 3,615-4,083 people and left another 11,956-12,962 wounded. Last year, media reports listed between 169-200 Iraqis killed and 111-112 injured in 28 separate coalition air strikes, according to the IBC project. These numbers also appear to be on the rise. John Sloboda, the project's spokesperson and co-founder notes by email that, during 2006, the "vast majority" of lethal air strikes took place during the latter half of the year.

Asked about the assertion that the second half of 2006 was deadlier for Iraqis, due to U.S. air strikes, and the possible reasons for this, Lt. Col. Kennedy waxed eloquent: "War, by its very nature, has ebbs and flows, and we constantly review the application of airpower to best support the forces on the ground in theater. We view this as simply part of our contract to the warfighters. As we do not discuss operational aspects of missions, I'll decline further comment." But recently, Air Force Chief of Staff T. Michael Moseley did admit that he had "anecdotal evidence" suggesting "airpower is the most lethal of the components in wrapping up bad guys." He continued, "As far as numbers of people killed, as far as wrapping up bad guys and as far as delivering a kinetic effect, the air component — which also includes Marine and Navy air, by the way — is the most lethal of the components."

According to IBC's figures, during the first three months of 2007, U.S. air attacks had already killed more than half as many civilians as had died in all air strikes last year — some 95-107 deaths; and publicly available CENTAF statistics indeed do show a *surge* in close air-support missions in 2007. For example, between March 24 and March 30, 2006, CENTAF reported 366 close air support missions. In 2007, the number for the same dates skyrocketed to 437 — an almost 20% jump.

The Secret of Why the Air War Is So Secret

Unfortunately, media reports on the air war are so sparse, with reporting confined largely to reprinting U.S. military handouts and announcements of air strikes, that much of the air war in Iraq remains unknown — although the very fact of an occupying power regularly conducting air strikes in and near population centers should have raised a question or two. Echoing Ali al-Fadhily's comments about the dearth of international observers in Iraq, Garlasco of Human Rights Watch notes, "Because of the lack of security we've had no one on the ground for three years now, and so we have no way of knowing what's going on there." He adds, "It's a huge hole in all the human rights organizations' reporting."

But human rights organizations and other NGOs are just part of the story. Since the Bush administration's invasion, the American air war has been given remarkably short shrift in the media. Back in December 2004, Tom Engelhardt, writing at Tomdispatch, called attention to this glaring absence. Seymour Hersh's seminal piece on air power, "Up in the Air," published in the *New Yorker* in late 2005, briefly ushered in some mainstream attention to the subject. And articles by Dahr Jamail, an independent journalist who covered the American occupation of Iraq, before and after the Hersh piece, are among the smattering of pieces that have offered glimpses of the air campaign and its impact. To date, however, the mainstream media has not, to use the words of Lt. Col. Kennedy, engaged in a "relentless pursuit of the number of cannon rounds" fired — or any other aspect of the air war or its consequences for Iraqis.

Les Roberts especially laments just “how profoundly the press has failed us” when it comes to coverage of the war. “In the first couple of years of the war,” he says, “our survey data suggest that there were more deaths from bombs dropped by our planes than there were deaths from roadside explosives and car bombs [detonated by insurgents].” The only group on the ground systematically collecting violent death data at the time, the NGO Coordinating Committee for Iraq, he notes, found the same thing. “If you had been reading the U.S. papers and watching the U.S. television news at the time,” Roberts adds, “you would have gotten the impression that anti-coalition bombs were more numerous. That was not just wrong, it probably was wrong by a factor of ten!”

With the military unwilling to tell the truth – or say anything at all, in most cases– and unable to provide the stability necessary for NGOs to operate, it falls to the mainstream media, even at this late stage of the conflict, to begin ferreting out substantive information on the air war. It seems, however, that until reporters begin bypassing official U.S. military pronouncements and locating Iraqi sources, we will remain largely in the dark with little knowledge of what can only be described as the secret U.S. air war in Iraq.

Nick Turse is the associate editor and research director of Tomdispatch.com. He has written for the Los Angeles Times, the San Francisco Chronicle, the Nation, the Village Voice, and regularly for Tomdispatch.
