

# When US Cruise Missiles Destroyed a Sudanese Pharmaceutical Plant

## ACTS OF EMPIRE

On August 28, 1998, a submarine in the Red Sea launched thirteen cruise missiles into a building in Khartoum, Sudan. Describing the destruction, the security guard on duty, Amin Muhamod, told a reporter: “The walls just disappeared. One moment I was lying down, listening to the sound of planes. The next, everything was smoke and fire. I didn’t know there were such weapons.” The building that Amin Muhamod was guarding was the al-Shifa pharmaceutical plant, one of only three pharmaceutical plants in Sudan at the time. Al-Shifa is the Arabic word for health. The missile strike was directly ordered by then US president Bill Clinton.

Long before the missile strike, long before the al-Shifa plant was constructed, the US empire declared itself the ultimate arbiter of events in the Middle East and North Africa. The empire has put this principle in practice from the CIA-sponsored overthrow of the democratically elected Iranian president Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953 to the 2020 regime of sanctions, occupations, drone bombings, proxy wars, and puppet governments. No matter the cost in lives or the trampling on the sovereignty of the people, the US has sought to ensure its control over the smooth flow of oil and strategic trade routes in the region.

Despite major cultural and political differences, the leaderships of both US political parties have been committed to the principle of US military and political dominance over the Middle East and North Africa, as can be seen in the continued deployment of US troops and ships, numerous deadly military interventions, and the continued propping up of brutally repressive pro-US governments, particularly the Saudi monarchy. Bill Clinton, elected as a ‘forward looking’ Democrat, was no different in this regard. In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Clinton believed in maintaining US imperial dominance through multilateral bodies like NATO and the United Nations where possible, but was fundamentally committed to the maintenance and expansion of the US empire even in the absence of international support.

Throughout the 1980’s, the US armed, trained, and supported anti-Soviet guerrilla fighters in Afghanistan, some of whom would go on to form the al-Qaeda network associated with Osama bin Laden. In 1998, decades of American meddling blew back in spectacular fashion when al-Qaeda associates detonated truck bombs outside of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, killing 224 people, the vast majority Kenyan civilians. The destruction at the embassies and tragic loss of African lives didn’t provoke a rethinking of US intervention in the Middle East and North Africa, nor did the US attempt to pursue the perpetrators through international legal means, as called for by a unanimous UN resolution at the time. Instead, Bill Clinton unleashed a new round of terrorism on Sudan.

With typical imperial arrogance, the US named its response ‘Operation Infinite Reach,’ launching cruise missiles at an al-Qaeda training camp in Afghanistan and destroying the al-Shifa plant in Khartoum. At the time, US officials claimed that the plant was potentially financially linked to bin Laden and possibly producing materials that could be used to produce chemical weapons. None of this was true. Military historian and retired US army colonel Andrew Bacevich succinctly summarizes the whole operation:

"Tomahawks [missiles] demolished the Al-Shifa plant, killing a night watchman and badly injuring a bystander. Yet a subsequent investigation conducted by American scientists cast serious doubts on U.S. claims of the plant being used for nefarious purposes. One thing only appeared certain: The wrecked facility was never going to produce the badly needed antibiotics and antimalarial drugs for which it had been designed."

While then Secretary of State Madeline Albright described the bombing as “the war of the future” and, seemingly without irony, denounced those “who believe that taking down innocent persons is some form of political expression,” it was immediately apparent that al-Shifa was simply a much-needed pharmaceutical factory. The first TV crews on the scene noted the ground covered with Aspirin pills, and it was quickly revealed that the owner of al-Shifa had no financial connections to bin Laden.

In 1999, Pulitzer-prize-winning journalist James Risen revealed in the New York Times that at the time of the bombing, the US did not know who owned al-Shifa, and the supposed evidence of chemical weapons manufacturing was a single soil sample taken by the C.I.A. near al-Shifa, on land with a different owner, that had high levels of a substance used in the production of nerve gas. They had no evidence of financial ties between the al-Shifa plant and al-Qaeda because there was none. They had no evidence of anything other than pharmaceuticals being produced because there was nothing other than pharmaceuticals being produced. The British ambassador to Sudan was even present at a ceremony celebrating the plant's opening. Risen reported that State Department officials had expressed doubt about the bin Laden connection before the bombing, and a State Department report being prepared after the bombing that would have exposed the lies was scuttled by Albright and never released.

At the time of the bombing, al-Shifa was one of only three pharmaceutical plants in Sudan, which was in the midst of a civil war and under sanctions that restricted the importation of medicine. Al-Shifa was the only Sudanese pharmaceutical plant producing medicines that treated tuberculosis. It was the country's major source of antimalarial drugs, and the only Sudanese pharmaceutical factory that produced veterinary drugs combating parasites in animals (Sudan was then and remains today a majority agrarian country). There is no official record of the death toll due to the halt in the production of crucial medicines. The United States prevented attempts by the UN to investigate the resulting death toll. The German Ambassador to Sudan suggested that tens of thousands of people died as a result of the strike.

Whether Clinton and his top aides knew that al-Shifa was a pharmaceutical plant and ignored it or whether they were using shoddy intelligence to score political points (Clinton was in the midst of a scandal involving an extra-marital affair), in destroying the plant, the US acted with an astounding level of recklessness and cruelty, condemning a generation of Sudanese people to suffer and die from horrific and preventable diseases. Dr. Idris Eltayeb, then the chair of the al-Shifa board, compared the bombing to 9/11, saying that the missile attack on al-Shifa *"was just as much an act of terrorism as at the Twin Towers—the only difference is we know who did it. I feel very sad about the loss of life there, but in terms of numbers, and the relative cost to a poor country, this was worse."*

Sources: Andrew Bacevich, *America's War for the Greater Middle East: A Military History* (2016); William Blum, *Killing Hope: U.S. Military and CIA Interventions since World War 2* (1995); Mike Davis, *Buda's Wagon: A Brief History of the Car Bomb* (2007); *The Guardian*; *Jacobin*; *The New York Times*; *Slate*; *United Kingdom Parliament*; *United Nations*



*Medicine bottles in the rubble of al-Shifa*

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