

# New evidence that US invasion has produced epidemic of birth defects in Iraq

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A new study confirms, not for the first time, the horrific price paid by the Iraqi people for the US-led invasion of their country in 2003, and the 2004 bombing campaign and assaults on the city of Fallujah in particular.

Eight years after the attacks on Fallujah, a majority-Sunni city about 40 miles west of Baghdad where the resistance to the invasion had been tenacious, the consequences of this collective punishment, illegal under international law, are continuing to unfold.

A study published in the *Bulletin of Environmental Contamination and Toxicology* focuses on an extraordinary epidemic of congenital birth defects in Iraqi cities over the past decade, particularly in Fallujah and in the southern city of Basra, assaulted by British troops in 2003.

This study has been released only one month before a broader survey is due to be released by the World Health Organization (WHO). The WHO report has looked at nine areas in Iraq and is also expected to show increases in birth defects.

As summarized in the British newspaper *The Independent*, the first study, entitled “Metal Contamination and the Epidemic of Congenital Birth Defects in Iraqi Cities” and published online on September 16, pinpoints statistics for Fallujah and Basra that add up to a public health crisis that is as serious as any other around the world.

More than 50 percent of all births surveyed in Fallujah were born with a birth defect between 2007 and 2010, the newspaper explains. In the 1990s, Fallujah had a birth defect rate of 2 percent. This rose to about 10 percent in the early years of the twenty-first century, and then exploded in the years following the siege of Fallujah in 2004.

The data on miscarriages was also significant. Before

the 2004 attacks on Fallujah, both in April and in November-December of that year, about 10 percent of pregnancies ended in miscarriage. This rose to a rate of 45 percent in the two years after the bombings. It fell as the most drastic attacks subsided, but the rate still remained high, at one in six pregnancies.

In Basra, attacked by British troops as part of the US-led invasion, the data is also compelling. Al Basrah Maternity Hospital recorded birth defects in just 1.3 out of 1,000 babies born a decade before the 2003 assault. This had risen to 20 out of 1,000, a 17-fold increase that is very likely attributable to the decade-long US-led sanctions campaign. In the past seven years, the rate of birth defects has risen another 60 percent, to 37 out of 1,000 births.

One of the authors of the article, Mozghan Savabieasfahani, an environmental toxicologist at the University of Michigan’s School of Public Health, spoke to *The Independent* about the study’s significance. The birth defects are almost certainly related to metal exposure as a result of bombs and bullets used over the past two decades. Levels of lead were five times higher in the hair of children with birth defects in Fallujah than in other children, and mercury levels were six times higher.

Dr. Savabieasfahani said there is a “footprint of metal in the population” and there is “compelling evidence linking the staggering increases in Iraqi birth defects to neuro-toxic metal contamination following the repeated bombardments of Iraqi cities.”

“In utero exposure to pollutants can drastically change the outcome of an otherwise normal pregnancy,” the doctor continued. “The metal levels we see in the Fallujah children with birth defects clearly indicates that metals were involved in the manifestation of birth defects in these children. The massive and

repeated bombardment of these cities is clearly implicated here.” She added that the data was like an underestimate, since parents often hide children with birth defects.

A professor of environmental toxicology at Leeds University in Britain, Alastair Hay, told *The Independent* that the figures in the study were “absolutely extraordinary” and that “people here would be worried if there was a five or 10 percent increase [in birth defects]. Professor Hay said that another factor, in addition to the increase in metal exposure, was “the extreme stress people are under in that period; we know this can cause major physiological changes.”

Official spokesmen for both the US Defense Department and the British government responded to the latest findings with statements that add up to little more than evasion and double talk. The Pentagon claimed, “We are not aware of any official reports indicating an increase in birth defects in Al Basrah or Fallujah that may be related to exposure to the metals contained in munitions used by the US or coalition partners. We always take very seriously public health concerns about any population living in a combat theatre.”

The ongoing studies on public health show the limits of the “shock and awe” campaign trumpeted by the Bush administration and continued with less fanfare by its successor. The military supremacy of American imperialism cannot resolve its growing crisis. It is deployed in a desperate struggle for oil and other natural resources, as well as geopolitical advantage against its rivals. While the political establishment seeks to forget the Iraqi adventure and the liberal wing of this establishment credits Obama with extricating the US from that country, the legacy of the war crimes committed under both parties continues to be exposed, even as new wars and new crimes are being prepared.



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