

US war raised birth defects in Iraq; Gaza next?

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**OPINION
EXCLUSIVE**

Pollution caused by imperialist wars has contaminated much of the world for decades (i.e. Korea, Japan, and Vietnam) and it continues today. Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Libya, and Palestine are but a few examples of countries that the United States has most recently militarily invaded, occupied, and has left a massive legacy of environmental contamination. The ongoing US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza is staring us in the face as we discuss war contamination by toxic pollutants. US-backed Israeli genocide has slaughtered approximately 200,000 people in only nine months, releasing unimaginable volumes of toxic pollutants in this small strip of land.

Since October 2023, the US has shamelessly provided Israel with \$18 billion in military aid. It is clear that this genocide, with its human and environmental cost, is a more severe re-play of what the world witnessed in Iraq. Without a doubt, after the dust settles and the immediate bombing and slaughter of innocent Palestinians stop, the world will see environmental devastation the scope and size of which has never been seen.



Boys play with a ball in front of burning oilfields in Qayyara, south of Mosul, Iraq, in November 2016.
GORAN TOMASEVIC/REUTERS

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War contamination, despite being the single most devastating source of world pollution, has received little attention from Western Academia, an academia that professes to be “concerned” about world health and human well-being. Western academics’ concern for public health and human well-being has never stopped them from accepting large sums of research funding from sources like the US Department of Defense and other industries that are closely connected to the war industry. For that reason, Western scientists are less inclined to investigate war-created contamination because that line of inquiry would implicate their funders and their financial backers. Even the US-based “non-governmental” organizations that offer research funding to Western academicians must not question or appear to be at odds with US global policies. Therefore, such organizations are in the habit of soft-pedaling or simply keeping silent about massacres that the US perpetuates, long before the one US has been committing in the Middle East.

We see in real life that Western academicians rarely, if ever, articulate scientific questions that have the potential to scrutinize US-created war pollution. These are some of the most blatant reasons why in the West little attention is paid to war contamination and how such pollution harms the local population.

Independent research is hard to finance and even harder to conduct. But since 2011, we focused on the public health consequences of the US war in Iraq. We and some other independent investigators have established that since 2004, Iraq has been suffering from epidemics of cancers and congenital anomalies (birth defects). In addition, a few studies have linked exposure of Iraqis to war contamination to these cancers and congenital anomalies in children.

Since 2011, our team has conducted research in five Iraqi cities (Baghdad, Basra, Fallujah, Hawija, and Nasiriyah). In every city, we have found elevated levels of toxic metals in the bodies of children who were born with defects. We have found metals, like neurotoxic lead and mercury in children’s hair. These neurotoxic metals

damage the developing nervous system. Radioactive metals, like uranium and thorium that emit ionizing radiation are also elevated in children with birth defects. Exposure to ionizing radiation has been linked to birth defects in many studies.

Military/war pollution in Iraq has many sources. They include more than 100 bases that have burnt military trash, 24 hours a day, since 2004. These “burn pits” are large areas (some as large as 10 US football stadiums). In these burn pits, jet fuel was used to burn huge amounts of trash continuously in the open air for decades. The smoke from these pits can pollute the air, water, and soil. People living near or around military bases that burnt trash in pits are exposed to toxic fumes that are packed with toxic metals, including those we found in deformed babies in Iraq. Another source of military pollution in Iraq is “tank graveyards”. Today, many miles of Iraqi landscape are covered with hundreds and thousands of discarded armored vehicles, unexploded explosives, rusty trucks, cars, machinery, and corroding weapons. These military graveyards were created and abandoned by the United States Army. They continue to leach toxic metals into the Iraqi environment. The leaking of metals into the environment pollutes water, soil, and foodstuff that is planted and grows in polluted soil. Consumption of metal-contaminated food by the local population poisons that population.

One of our most significant findings in Iraq was in Nasiriyah. In Nasiriyah, we have shown that proximity to an active US military base is linked to increased incidents of birth defects. In fact, the closer a family lives to the military base, the higher the levels of some toxic metal in the children’s bodies and the higher the chances of having children with birth defects are.

With the hard work of many anti-war organizations, the United States has finally recognized burn-pit emissions as a significant source of human toxic exposure. In the summer of 2022, legislation was enacted to provide lifetime healthcare and disability benefits to US military personnel who became sick as a result of exposure to trash-burning pits in Iraq and Afghanistan. This is a rare and welcome achievement in the US that favors and pro-

protects human health.

However, Iraqi and Afghan people are every bit, if not more, deserving of such protection against the harmful effects of war contamination since Iraqi and Afghan populations are more vulnerable to toxic emissions. That is because, in a war zone, the local population is more heterogeneous consisting of developing fetuses, growing children, pregnant women, and the elderly, who are more susceptible to toxic exposure. In addition, compared to occupation forces, locals are exposed to toxic emissions for longer periods. Occupation soldiers, who are primarily young healthy adults, spend a limited time during their deployment in polluted areas. Meanwhile, the local population is immersed in the polluted environment often from their inception and for a much longer time during their most sensitive life stages.

We propose that similar provisions should be provided to citizens of Iraq and Afghanistan. The United States government should provide lifetime healthcare and disability benefits to Iraqi and Afghan citizens who have been exposed to toxic emissions, many of them for longer periods than US soldiers deployed there and during the most sensitive stages of their lives.

Furthermore, the cleanup of war pollution is the responsibility of the US and UK, which were the main forces behind the invasion and occupation of Iraq. We propose the US and the UK start decontamination of the Iraqi and Afghan landscapes by cleaning and disposing of the toxic material in burn pits and in military graveyards. Cleanup actions such as these will reduce public exposure to harmful war contaminants and save lives in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

It is our duty, as members of the international community, to first, demand an immediate and permanent cease-fire in Gaza and second, demand a US/UK cleanup of the toxic materials they left behind in Iraq and Afghanistan. That will save future generations of children from birth defects and other adverse birth outcomes, and it will set a precedent for environmental cleanup of war contaminants by those who instigate wars.



A doctor cares for children at Fallujah General Hospital in the city of Falluja west of Baghdad, Iraq, on November 12, 2009. A study linked the elevated rate of birth defects to US warfare in a paper published in the International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health.
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