

Iraq: Crimes against Humanity. The Babies Will Haunt Us

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It was like walking through a nightmare: drifting in an out of hospital rooms, down the long hallways, her contact with shock-ravaged Iraqi parents interrupted only by glimpses of their physically deformed and terminally sick babies who in many cases, would never see the outside of Fallujah's main hospital, ever.

Then, the more than vague sense that she must apologize. The words thick like molasses were hard to form. "I felt inadequate," said Donna Mulhearn. "What was so hard was, what do you say to these people other than saying sorry, which I said over and over again. You just wanted to offer more."



Iraqi baby in Fallujah. Credit: Donna Mulhearn.

[Donna Mulhearn](#) is a name we need to remember, as she is one of a small but dedicated group of citizen activists who, after most of us have said the long goodbye to Iraq in the rear-view mirror, are taking on the environmental and humanitarian legacy of the Iraq War as a personal cause. Right now, she is doing what the western mainstream has so far failed to do, which is [report on the horrifying number of miscarriages, deaths, birth defects and congenital illnesses among babies](#) in urban Fallujah, the site of some of the most intense U.S bombing (2004) during the war.

A generation of women in this Sunni Iraqi city, which at one point was considered an insurgent "breeding ground" during the war, is now unable to have consistently healthy babies, according to anecdotal reports and scientific studies. It's so bad that hospital officials are quietly telling women there to stop getting pregnant. Why? Many think it is because of the war pollution — due to everything from heavy metals from exploded ordnance to radiation left behind by depleted uranium used on U.S ammunition and tanks — inhaled by Fallujah's residents, seeped into the ground water, flowing in the nearby Tigris

River, choking the air they breathe.

“This is a toxic legacy, in which I would include, is the legacy of warfare,” Mulhearn told Antiwar.com in a recent Skype interview from her home in Australia. “In the last 10 years we’ve had a good focus on remnants of war that are visible — like land mines and cluster munitions, things that go boom and explode. We need to now look at those toxic remnants of war that are not visible but are extremely harmful to communities.”

“Harmful” seems like such an understatement for the things the doctors in Fallujah have been seeing in recent years. Thanks to Google, you can see it too, but we warn you it is not for the squeamish. Some of the more common defects on the rise in Fallujah General Hospital: [Gastroschisis](#) (babies born with their intestine protruding outside their small bellies), [Hydrocephalus](#) (babies born with “water on the brain, abnormal brain swelling), [Encephalocele](#) (neural tube defect in which babies are born with sac-like protrusions from their heads), [Macrocephaly](#) (babies with abnormally large heads), [spina bifida](#) (backbone and spinal canal are not closed before birth, creating gaping hole in the babies’ backs) and cleft lip and palate.



In front of the rubble during one of her trips to Iraq during the war. Credit: Donna Mulhearn.

There have also been numerous reports — and photos do not lie — of infants born without eyes, missing limbs, extra limbs, covered in tumors, missing genitalia, severe brain damage. Back in 2010, the BBC’s Mark Simpson reported seeing a baby with three heads as he toured a clinic in Fallujah. When I wrote [“Children of War”](#) for *The American Conservative* in March 2011, doctors were reporting two birth defects a day, compared to two every two weeks in 2008.

When Mulhearn made her trip in July, she was told that there are still two a day on average and the desperation all around her seemed to be getting worse. “It hit me pretty hard, I cried a lot. You met a baby who was about an hour old and she had a big fleshy hole in her back, and it was a common issue — spina bifida — her grandmother was there because the mother was still in shock.”

Because of the lack of interest and resources, few studies have been done to identify the scope and cause of what is being called a crisis by advocates like Mulhearn and health specialists familiar with what is going on in Fallujah, as well as the city of Basra, which has been dealing with both congenital defects and high rates of childhood cancer (Basra has been at the center of heavy artillery warfare dating back to the Iran-Iraq War in 1982).

Dr. Samira Alani, a pediatric specialist at Fallujah General Hospital who has been a stalwart voice on the issue for the last few years, told al Jazeera in early 2012 that she had recorded 699 birth defects since 2009. In December 2010, the [International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health](#) issued a study that said that since 2003, congenital malformations were found in 15 percent of all births in Fallujah (population 326,471). Track that with [3 percent of babies born in the United States](#) with birth defects — [6 percent worldwide](#) — and the problem appears even more stark and alarming.

[The most recent study](#), conducted by a group of Iraqi researchers led by Dr. Mozghan Savabieasfahani, an environmental toxicologist at the University of Michigan's School of Public Health, found higher levels of mercury and lead in the hair and toenail samples of the mothers of babies born with birth defects in Fallujah. Out of the babies born since 2007 to the 56 families surveyed (these families were screened for history of birth defects; the mothers determined not to be drinkers nor smokers), 50 percent had birth defects and one in six pregnancies ended in a miscarriage. This is up from one in 10 infants born with birth defects and 10 percent miscarriages before 2004. The study also found similar rates of toxicity and birth defects in Basra, which was bombed and occupied by the British during the recent Iraq War.

Their conclusion: "Present knowledge on the effects of prenatal exposure to metals, combined with our results, suggests that the bombardment of Al Basrah and Fallujah may have exacerbated public exposure to metals, possibly culminating in the current epidemic of birth defects."

After the report was released in October, Savabieasfahani [told reporters](#) that there is a "footprint of metal in the population" and "compelling evidence linking the staggering increases in Iraqi birth defects to neuro-toxic metal contamination following the repeated bombardments of Iraqi cities."

Savabieasfahani, who was also involved in the aforementioned 2010 study, called it an "epidemic" and "public health crisis."

"In utero exposure to pollutants can drastically change the outcome of an otherwise normal pregnancy," she said. "The massive and repeated bombardment of these cities is clearly implicated here. I have no knowledge of any alternative source of metal contamination in these areas."

This of course has been denied by American authorities who continue to insist that the war has nothing to do with the grim statistics coming out of the main hospitals in Fallujah and Basra. Then again, [they also deny](#) that their own soldiers are getting sick from all of the toxicity they were exposed to from the huge burn pits on American bases in Iraq and Afghanistan.

A Department of Defense spokesperson told [The Guardian \(UK\)](#) in October that "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 now living in a combat theater. Unexploded ordnance, including improvised explosive devices, are a recognized hazard."

A UK government spokesperson said there was no "reliable scientific or medical evidence to

confirm a link between conventional ammunition and birth defects in Basra”, adding: “All ammunition used by UK armed forces falls within international humanitarian law and is consistent with the Geneva Convention.”

The thrust of Mulhearn’s work concentrates on depleted uranium (DU), its use in the war by coalition forces and its contamination of the people in hard hit cities like Fallujah. DU is a dense, highly toxic, radioactive heavy metal that is primarily used for its penetrative and shielding properties. It is widely found in American Abrams tanks and Bradley fighting vehicles, many of which are rotting away in the desert from *the first Gulf War*. Tiny particles of the heavy metals from the rotting carcasses, plus unexploded or exploded munitions carrying DU, can travel long distances in the air and when inhaled it can be deadly, according to scientists.

“The invisible particles created when those bullets struck and burned are still ‘hot.’ They make Geiger counters sing, and they stick to the tanks, contaminating the soil and blowing in the desert wind, as they will for the 4.5 billion years it will take the DU to lose just half its radioactivity,” wrote the *Christian Science Monitor’s* Scott Peterson in 2002 when [studying the battle ravaged landscape of Iraq](#) before the 2003 invasion. He called the “radioactive battlefield” and the growing health problems ascribed to it *then*, a possible “omen of an unsettled future.”

Later in Baghdad after the invasion, Peterson used his Geiger counter to test for DU, which came with the 300,000 rounds the Air Force shot from its A-1 “Warthog” planes during the first phase of “shock and awe” (Warthog war porn [here](#)).

“The children haven’t been told not to play with the radioactive debris,” Peterson [wrote in May 2003](#). He pointed to just one site where U.S. troops had put up handwritten warnings in Arabic for Iraqis to stay away. “There, a 3-foot-long DU dart from a 120 mm tank shell, was found producing radiation at more than 1,300 times background levels. It made the [Geiger counter] staccato bursts turn into a steady whine.”

The military has been quite mum on the use of DU throughout the war and there is no way to tell for sure how much was used during the two major bombardments of Fallujah, a densely inhabited city. We know that there were relentless air assaults from March to September 2004, and more in the second phase in November 2004, using a “steady pace” of attacks mostly from AC-130 gunships and fixed-wing aircraft. There was strafing of insurgents from F-15 jets and strikes from 500-lb GBU-38 JDAM (Joint Direct Attack Munition) bombs (get the full measure of what they call “The Fallujah Model” in this breathless report in [Air Force Magazine](#) in 2005).

Also during the November phase, [in a little known admission](#), a Pentagon spokesperson said that white phosphorus — which sizzles the skin right off the bone — was used to as an incendiary weapon against “enemy combatants.”

The Pentagon likes to point to its own studies, like the one conducted by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in 2010, which examined water, soil and vegetation in selected cities including Basra but not Fallujah, to deny culpability for the country’s apparent toxification. That study concluded “the radiation doses from DU do not pose a radiological hazard to the population at the four studied locations in southern Iraq.”

The challenge of parsing out all of this potential toxicity from the munitions, as well as

contamination from past wars — including Saddam Hussein’s own use of chemical weapons — and little or no regulatory protections against industrial waste and hazards, looms large. We know it is bad: an Iraqi study in 2010 found 40 cites with high levels of heavy metals and radiation, with the worst in the cities, including Basra, Fallujah and Najaf.

The west, it seems, has washed its hands of the matter. “They don’t study effect of war on the countries that are invading or bombing or whatever — they just don’t do that,” said Adil Shamoo, an Iraqi-American who teaches at the Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology at the University of Maryland. He believes the most recent study of hair and toenail samples has warranted enough evidence for a much larger examination of Fallujah in the aftermath. But he suggests that political pressure is standing in the way.

“There is a willful negligence — if you don’t study, you won’t find.”

Mulhearn says there is similar apathy in Australia, though there is more of a grassroots awareness of the problem and more open criticism of the Australian government (which also supported operations in Iraq) about it. She said [a much anticipated report](#) (expected soon) by the World Health Organization is supposed to shed light on the prevalence of congenital birth defects in nine major areas of Iraq, though it will not address the possible causes.



Donna Mulhearn is kissed by a Baghdad schoolgirl a day before the 2003 invasion. Credit: Donna Mulhearn.

“This community needs answers,” said Mulhearn, [who has been back and forth from Iraq since 2003](#) when she went to Baghdad to serve as a “human shield” during the invasion. She was in Fallujah in 2004 during the fighting and served as a humanitarian aid worker there. She plans to go back to Fallujah in February, this time with a filmmaker. She will take him through the pediatric wards, and to the part of the dusty city graveyard (which used to be a football field) that now serves as a ramshackle baby burial ground.

“When I sat with the women —probably five or six families that had been affected — I asked, ‘what do you think caused this and why do you think this happened to your baby?’ All of them said, without blinking, without pause, that it’s from the weapons in the war, without question.”

Mulhearn then asked what they would have — compensation for medical bills, prosecution of possible war crimes? “They just said, ‘I want my baby better.’”

“That’s all they could see in front of them, their little baby.”

There are many layers to this story, Mulhearn pointed out, not the least of which is the care

for these infants. If they do live, they will be brought up in a society that is completely bereft of public supports for children with such disabilities — no special schools or wealthy private charities. Family networks are critical, but not everyone has one. “So you have these children with disabilities sitting in an empty room all day, some (families) have three of them, not being able to go to school or have any stimulation.”

This is our legacy, she said, including the western powers that invaded and occupied Iraq for nearly a decade. “I really felt it was a story that must be told.”

More of Mulhearn’s Fallujah photographs and reporting can be found [here](#).

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