

THE HUMAN CONSEQUENCES OF US FOREIGN POLICY IN FALLUJAH



by Ross Caputi

Fallujah is a major city in the western province of al Anbar, Iraq with about 300,000 residents. It sits about 50 miles west of Baghdad along the Euphrates river and along ancient trade routes with Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Syria. Because of its location at these crossroads, it has always been viewed as a strategically important city by invaders and Iraqis alike. And, historically, its residents have always been fierce defenders of their homeland.



The resistance in Fallujah played a pivotal role in defeating the British in the 1920's.¹ Fallujah was again at the center of the US-led occupation of Iraq from 2003 to 2011. During the first year of occupation, Fallujah was the strongest point of resistance against Coalition forces. Two major sieges were then launched against Fallujah to, as Major General Richard Natonski, Commanding General of the 1st Marine Division during the 2nd siege of Fallujah, put it, “eradicate” the “cancer called Fallujah”.²

The two sieges of Fallujah are amongst the most controversial operations of the occupation of Iraq. Perspectives of these events are highly polarized. The reality that Fallujans lived is vastly different from what Americans witnessed in the media coverage of these events.



The mainstream, corporate media played a significant role in shaping how Americans perceived Fallujah and the conflict there. Fallujah was often described in the media as a bastion of support for Saddam Hussein, and it was claimed that Fallujans opposed the US-led occupation out of their loyalty to Saddam and out of resentment from losing their privileged status as Sunnis in Saddam's Iraq. This depiction is false, however. It is true that many of Fallujah's residents were high

ranking officials in Saddam Hussein's Army, but Fallujah was also a city that suffered under Saddam Hussein, who was hostile to their religious conservatism.³

The portrayal of Fallujah was further skewed by the prevalence of embedded journalism in Iraq compared to unembedded journalism.⁴ Embedded journalists were attached to various military units within the Coalition. These journalists saw only what the occupying soldiers saw. Most importantly, they often saw things *how* the occupying soldiers saw them. That is, the perspective of the embedded journalists was ideologically situated within the assumptions and beliefs of the occupying forces. The perspective of Iraqis, who overwhelmingly rejected the occupation and the new government that the occupying forces were setting up in Baghdad, was hardly ever reported. Instead, the occupation was presumed to be legitimate, and all resistance to the occupation was presumed to be illegitimate.

There were a handful of unembedded journalists who took great risks to travel around Iraq and report the happenings of the occupation as Iraqis saw them. However, they were far out-numbered by embedded journalists, and they had far fewer resources to bring their journalism to a broad American audience. Hence, the information coming out of Iraq that dominated the airwaves and print media was from the perspective of the occupying forces.

The story of Fallujah must begin with a discussion of the media coverage of those events. The story of Fallujah is characterized by the insurmountable rift in perspectives and memories of the conflict that resulted from these vastly different sources of information. Most Americans remember the sieges of Fallujah as heroic victories over an evil, terrorist adversary, one that was unjustly attacking American troops and sabotaging the US military's efforts to bring stability and democracy to Iraq, because this was the story told by the mainstream media. This could not be further from how Iraqis experienced these events. Furthermore, the media was not just an observer of

this conflict; it was a weapon utilized by all sides. A report by the US Army's National Ground Intelligence Center, which was made publicly available by Wikileaks, attributes the "relative failure of the first Battle of Fallujah compared to the more successful second battle of Fallujah" to the US military's inability to control the number of embedded versus unembedded journalists in Fallujah during the first siege.⁵ Thus, the way in which the story of Fallujah was told in the past must be part of our analysis. The media was a participant in this conflict and they deserve as much focus as other actors, like the Coalition forces or the resistance.

The name "Fallujah" today carries many meanings. For some Fallujah is both a heroic example of resistance against empire and an example of the brutality of the US-led occupation. For others Fallujah is condemned as a center of anti-Americanism and the sieges of Fallujah are celebrated as victories over terrorism. The goal of this essay is not to reconcile these two perspectives. The truth is not always in the middle of two polarized views. The goal of this essay is to question what embedded journalists did not question, to attempt to identify facts in the midst of these "information operations", and to emphasize the human suffering caused by this conflict.

To begin, it is necessary to analyze the presumed legitimacy of the Coalition's mission in Iraq. As much as the human consequences of the sieges of Fallujah are unknown to most Americans, the context in which they occurred is also widely misunderstood. These operations were instances in a 8-year long illegal occupation, that came about from an illegal invasion. However, this fact is not widely known in the US.

The Bush administration argued that it was necessary to launch a preemptive attack on Iraq due to its past aggression against its neighbors and its possession of Weapons of Mass Destruction. These claims proved to be false, and it was later revealed that the Bush administration knew them to be false. Saddam Hussein had been successfully disarmed after the first Gulf War and he no longer posed any threat to any of his neighbors—just his own people.

The National Security Archives, maintained by George Washington University, have published three electronic briefing books that analyze declassified American and British documents from the time leading up to the invasion of Iraq.⁶ What these documents reveal is that the intelligence communities of both the US and the UK were highly skeptical of the information that was being presented to the public to justify the invasion of Iraq and removal of Saddam Hussein. They considered the information that claimed Saddam Hussein had WMDs, had connections to Al Qaeda, and posed a threat to the international community to be unreliable; and they acknowledged the existence of information that contradicted these claims.

Richard Falk, Professor Emeritus of International Law and Practice, wrote that, "[t]he invasion of Iraq in 2003 appears to be a flagrant example of aggressive war making. The subsequent military occupation is thus illegal and aggravated by abuses of the Geneva Conventions of 1949 governing the duties of an occupying state."⁷ As the famous Downing Street Memo states, "Bush wanted to remove Saddam, through

military action, justified by the conjunction of terrorism and WMD. But the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy.” The Bush and Blair administrations intentionally presented unreliable information as fact, and in doing so they misled the world and committed the Supreme Crime Against Humanity: aggression.

The mainstream media never questioned the legitimacy of the Coalition’s mission in Iraq. That’s not to say they never criticized it. The media wanted a successful regime change with minimal casualties and a smooth transition to a democratic Iraq, and they were willing to criticize the Bush administration and the US military to the extent that they failed to achieve these goals. The glaring fact that the invasion and occupation of Iraq was illegal never reached most Americans. Every minute of the occupation was illegitimate, every single operation from the major sieges against Fallujah down to the most mundane patrol. But most Americans never heard any principled criticism of our foreign policy in Iraq. Instead, it was presumed to be legitimate and the debate was limited to a cost/benefit analysis of how best to make the occupation a success.



Photo by Julian Andrews

The first instance of violence in Fallujah did not occur until April 28th, 2003, a few weeks after the invasion, when a US Army unit occupied a local school building. Fallujah had been mostly ignored during the invasion (Baghdad was the focus). But on April 28th US soldiers took over a school building and placed soldiers on the roof to observe the city. Many of Fallujah’s residents gathered outside of the school, peacefully protesting the disruption of their children’s education and the invasion of their privacy. At a certain point the American soldiers fired into the crowd, killing 13, three of whom were under 11 years old.⁸



Photo by Julian Andrews

It is unclear what provoked the shooting, but journalists on scene insist that the protestors were unarmed. None of the soldiers were punished, and the Army continued to occupy the school building.

Two days later Fallujans peacefully protested again, and the same scenario played out. The US Army fired into the

crowd, this time killing 2 and injuring 16 more.

These two incidents are regarded as the spark that ignited the resistance movement in Fallujah. From this point on armed resistance groups in Fallujah attacked Coalition forces whenever they entered their city.



Photo by Julian Andrews

Over the course of the next several months the resistance movement in Fallujah grew in size and strength. In turn, the US military responded with harsher and more heavy-handed tactics, killing 40 civilians within the first six months of occupation.⁹ But the more civilians that the US killed the stronger the resistance grew in resolve. Within a year Fallujah became the strongest center of resistance against the American-led occupation throughout all of Iraq.

The tit-for-tat nature of violent resistance and oppression over the course of the next year led to the infamous incident on March 31st, 2004, when the Sheikh Yassin Revenge Brigade, one of several resistance militias in Fallujah at the time, ambushed and killed four Blackwater USA mercenaries, whose bodies were then seized by an angry mob, mutilated, set on fire, and hung from a bridge.

The mainstream media broadcast images of the brutal manner in which the mercenaries' bodies were handled around the world. Many media networks called the men who were killed "civilians",¹⁰ while calling Fallujah "a center of anti-American hostility"¹¹ or worse. No one mentioned the dozens of Fallujan civilians who had been killed by US forces, including six civilians just five days earlier.¹² Nor did they mention how the religious leaders of Fallujah had denounced the mutilation of the mercenary's corpses.¹³ The emphasis of the media coverage of this event was on the brutality of the people of Fallujah and their anger towards America. The brutality of the occupation was not given equal coverage. What the average American learned of this event was that it was an act of violence with no cause by a people inherently hostile to the United States.

Paul Bremer, the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq, said that the deaths of the Mercenaries would "not go unpunished".¹⁴ And, indeed, they did not. US forces subsequently launched a major assault—the 1st siege of Fallujah—complete with ground forces, air support, and snipers. The stated purpose of the siege was to clear the city of all resistance fighters, but such heavy-handed tactics being used in a densely populated urban environment, where high civilian casualties should be expected, can only be considered collective punishment—a war crime.

The 1st siege of Fallujah began on April 5th, when US forces sealed off all entrances and exits to and from the city, trapping its 300,000 residents in the line of fire. However, US forces underestimated the capabilities of the resistance, who killed 36 US servicemen in the course of the operation.¹⁵



Ahmed Mansour, a journalist with Al Jazeera, was the only journalist who managed to get into Fallujah during this operation. In his book *Inside Fallujah: the unembedded story* he describes how US forces gradually escalated their use of force as the operation progressed, adding air support, artillery, and snipers to their use of ground troops.¹⁶ Their heavy-handed tactics claimed the lives of an estimated 800 civilians,¹⁷ sparking international outrage. Those who did not die directly from US gunfire, artillery, or airstrikes, died from a lack of medical supplies (because US forces did not allow humanitarian aid into the city) and disabled hospital equipment (because US forces cut electricity to the city).¹⁸

US forces committed several war crimes during this operation, including the use of cluster bombs, preventing humanitarian aid from entering the city,¹⁹ targeting civilian structures and civilian ambulances,²⁰ and generally failing to make a distinction between combatants and civilians.

US forces were unable to kill or capture all resistance fighters in Fallujah, as was their goal, during the first siege. Eventually they had to negotiate a withdrawal from the city. An agreement was made between US forces and the leadership in Fallujah that a



ceasefire would be called, that US forces would withdraw from the city limits of Fallujah, and that Fallujah would be placed in charge of its own security.

Although US forces never admitted that they were defeated in Fallujah, residents and resistance fighters alike celebrated the US withdrawal as a victory and a liberation.²¹ Fallujah quickly gained fame throughout all of Iraq and much of the Third World as a “city of heroes”. Fallujah came to

Photo by Dahr Jamail



Photo by Dahr Jamail

symbolize resistance against empire—an idea that resonated with oppressed people around the world.

One of the terms of the ceasefire was that Fallujans would manage their own security and that occupation forces would not be allowed within city limits. This led to the creation of the Fallujah Brigade, AKA the Fallujah Protection Army. The Fallujah Brigade was comprised of Iraqi police, resistance fighters, and former soldiers from

Saddam Hussein's army, and was given control over Fallujah's security on April, 29th 2004. However, the Fallujah Brigade only lasted about four months before being disbanded by the US. Furthermore, US forces never respected their agreement to leave Fallujah's security matters to the Fallujah Brigade, and they never stopped bombing Fallujah after the ceasefire.²²

What becomes clear from looking at this period in Fallujah is that US-led forces wouldn't have accepted anything short of complete submission to their authority in Iraq. What Fallujans wanted didn't matter. Their right to run their affairs as they saw fit didn't matter. Far from promoting democracy and stability in Iraq, US-led forces were trying to impose a specific political and social agenda on Iraqis through deadly force.

Journalist Nir Rosen pinpoints June 19th, 2004 as the date that "the Americans initiated a policy of bombing Falluja from the skies every few days, killing scores of civilians in an attempt to target members of Abu Musab al Zarqawi's network."²³

Coalition forces and the Iraqi Interim Government were claiming that Zarqawi, the alleged leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq, was based in Fallujah, and they demanded that the people of Fallujah turn him over to authorities.



Abu Musab al Zarqawi

However, Fallujans denied that Zarqawi was in their city. The leadership in Fallujah even wrote a letter to, then Secretary General of the UN, Kofi Annan, on October 13, 2004, pleading that he intervene:

As we write, these crimes are being perpetrated against the city of Fallujah. US war planes are launching their most powerful bombs against the civilian population, killing and

wounding hundreds of innocent people. Their tanks are pounding the city with heavy artillery
...

We know that we live in a world of double standards. In Fallujah the US has created a new and shadowy target-Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Al-Zarqawi is a new excuse to justify the US's criminal actions . . . The people of Fallujah assure you that this person is not in the city, nor probably anywhere else in Iraq. Many times the people of Fallujah have asked that if anyone sees al-Zarqawi they should kill him . . . Our representatives have repeatedly denounced kidnapping and killing of civilians. We have nothing to do with any group that acts in an inhumane manner.

We call on you and the leaders of the world to exert the greatest pressure on the Bush administration to end its crimes against Fallujah and pull its army back from the city. When they left a while ago, the city had peace and tranquillity. There was no disorder in the city. The civil administration here functioned well, despite the lack of resources. Our "offense" is simply that we did not welcome the forces of occupation. This is our right according to UN Charter, according to international law and according to the norms of humanity.

It is very urgent that you, along with other world leaders, intervene immediately to prevent another massacre. We have tried to contact UN representatives in Iraq to ask them to do this but, as you know, they are sealed off in the maximum security Green Zone in Baghdad and we are not allowed access to them. We want the UN to take a stand on the situation in Fallujah.²⁴

Kofi Annan responded by sending a letter to the leaders of the US, UK, and Iraq expressing his concern about the safety of Iraqi civilians, and he did nothing more to stop the coming slaughter of the 2nd siege of Fallujah in November.²⁵

Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was just another false pretext used by the Coalition forces to justify their aggression in Fallujah.²⁶ By demanding that Fallujans hand over a man that might never have even set foot in their city, US-led forces placed an impossible condition for peace on Fallujans.

On November 8th, 2004 Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld announced the beginning of Operation Phantom Fury, the 2nd siege of Fallujah. The reason he gave for the operation was that,

[i]f Iraq is to be free and a peaceful society, one part of the country cannot remain under the rule of assassins, terrorists and the remnants of Saddam Hussein's regime. Every effort has been made to persuade the criminals running roughshod over Fallujah to reach a political solution, but they've chosen the path of violence instead. So at the request of the interim Iraqi government, coalition soldiers are today assisting Iraqi forces in conducting coordinated offensive operations in and around the city of Fallujah to restore law and order to this troubled area.²⁷

This statement contains many lies that must be addressed individually.

First, it is misleading to call the resistance fighters in Fallujah “assassins” and “terrorists”. The resistance fighters in Fallujah were combatants just like coalition forces. And when combatants attack and kill other combatants, it is neither an assassination nor an act of terrorism, by definition of “assassination” and “terrorism”. It is simply warfare.



Rumsfeld’s use of these terms violates their conventional meaning. It is a naked attempt at manipulating the public into believing that the resistance fighters in Fallujah are evil and the coalition forces are good.

Also, it is misleading to say that Fallujans were under the rule of these forces. True, “most inhabitants of . . . [Fallujah] supported the resistance”.²⁸ And the Fallujah Brigade, which was comprised of many resistance fighters, was in charge of Fallujah’s security for a period of time. However, they never ruled Fallujah.

What is more alarming than this lie, is the implicit assumption that coalition forces knew better than Fallujans themselves who should be ruling them. If Fallujans wanted to be ruled by “remnants of Saddam Hussein’s regime”, that should have been their choice. Rumsfeld’s words reflect imperial attitudes about the right of Fallujans to determine their own affairs.

Furthermore, US-led forces did not make “[e]very effort” to reach a peaceful solution with Fallujah. It was the US who chose the path of violence, not Fallujans. Between August and November, 2004 the leadership in Fallujah made numerous attempts to negotiate with the US, the UN, and the Interim Iraqi Government.²⁹

On October 28th, 2004 the Washington Post reported that earlier in the month,

local insurgent leaders [from Fallujah] voted overwhelmingly to accept broad conditions set by the Iraqi government, including demands that they eject foreign fighters from the city, turn over all heavy weapons, dismantle illegal checkpoints and allow the Iraqi National Guard to enter the city. In turn, the insurgents set their own conditions, which included a halt to U.S. attacks on the city and acknowledgment by the military that women and children have been among the casualties in U.S. strikes.³⁰

On November 6, 2004 the Washington Post reported that,

[s]ome former officials with experience in Iraq called the Sunni proposal a potential breakthrough that could avert not only an assault on Fallujah but also a violent aftermath, when insurgents might take the fight elsewhere.³¹

However, these proposals were rejected by the US.

Finally, instead of the Iraqi government requesting that coalition forces lay siege to Fallujah, as Rumsfeld describes, it was the US that pressured the Interim Iraqi Government to support the siege.³²

Another linchpin in the coalition's argument for the 2nd siege of Fallujah was the presence of foreign fighters in the city. When Donald Rumsfeld announced the 2nd siege of Fallujah on November 8th, 2004, he asserted that, "[n]o government can allow terrorists and foreign fighters to use its soil to attack its people and to attack its government, and to intimidate the Iraqi people." However, independent journalist, Dahr Jamail, noted that this statement could "have been mistaken for irony".³³

Indeed, coalition forces were no less foreign than the handful of international fighters who had traveled to Fallujah to fight against the occupation. The illegitimacy of the foreign anti-occupation fighters is presumed in rhetoric of the White House, but never explained or justified.

It may be irrelevant to argue that the occupying forces had always exaggerated the role of foreign anti-occupation forces in Iraq, because the occupation was illegitimate, regardless of their numbers and capabilities of the foreign anti-occupation fighters. However, it is important to see how US leaders misled the public on this issue. In Nir Rosen's coverage of the first siege of Fallujah, he describes an overwhelmingly local resistance with a minority of foreign, anti-occupation fighters who were disliked by many in Fallujah because they would not "recognize the authority" of local leaders.³⁴

An article in *The Independent* on November 16th, 2004 reported that of the 1,052 prisoners that Coalition forces had captured during the 2nd siege, no more than two dozen were foreign fighters.³⁵

These reports suggest that US-led forces exaggerated the numbers, capabilities, and role of the foreign anti-occupation forces in Fallujah. US-led forces relied on such claims in order to make their siege of Fallujah appear to be a humanitarian mission. But if one were to ask an average Iraqi who was more welcome in their country, the occupying forces or anti-occupation forces from other countries in the region, we might get a different answer from the one Rumsfeld provided. But, unfortunately for Iraqis, their opinions rarely mattered to Western powers.

Many eyewitness accounts of the 2nd siege of Fallujah from US veterans, journalists, and aid organizations describe the operation as being indiscriminate on many levels. One of the major principles upon which international humanitarian law is based is the

distinction between civilians and combatants. However, coalition forces failed in several ways to make this basic distinction.

Several reports have come out that Coalition forces prohibited all males aged “15 to 55” from fleeing Fallujah prior to the 2nd siege, regardless of whether or not there was any evidence that they were resistance fighters.³⁶ From this alone it is apparent that Coalition forces made no attempt to distinguish between civilians and combatants. In conjunction with the indiscriminate tactics and weapons used by Coalition forces during this operation, the severity of this war crime becomes clear.



Coalition leaders were well aware that up to 50,000 civilians remained trapped in Fallujah during the 2nd siege.³⁷ Yet the US Marine ground forces were instructed that *all* civilians had left the city and only combatants remained.³⁸ Other units were instructed that Fallujah was a “free fire zone”.³⁹ Tactics like “reconnaissance by fire” (which is firing into an area when it is not clear what or who is there) and the bulldozing houses without checking to see who is inside were regularly employed during this operation.⁴⁰ Also, white phosphorous was used as an offensive weapon, which is both illegal as an incendiary weapon and for its indiscriminate nature.⁴¹

All of the above constitutes clear violations of rules 1, 7, 11, 15, 16, 17, and 19 of the International Committee of the Red Cross Summary of International Humanitarian Law. Coalition forces did not “at all times distinguish between civilian objectives and military objectives”, they did not choose “means and methods of warfare with a view to avoiding, and in any event minimizing, incidental loss of civilian life”, and they did not “do everything feasible to cancel or suspend an attack if it becomes apparent . . . that the attack may be expected to cause incidental loss of civilian life”.⁴²

The Iraqi Red Crescent Society estimated that up to 6,000 civilians may have been killed during the operation.⁴³ Others place the figure lower at 3,000. And over 200,000 residents became refugees. Far from being a liberation, the 2nd siege of Fallujah was an indiscriminate assault on the city itself and its people.

After the 2nd siege was over and the US declared the operation a victory, civilians were allowed back into their ruined city. Up to 70% of the buildings in Fallujah were destroyed. Shortly after, the US placed such strict security measures on the city that its residents complained that Fallujah had become like a prison. All residents were required to wear ID badges that contained biometric information about their fingerprints and

rental scan. And all movement in and out of Fallujah was heavily restricted by checkpoints.⁴⁴

Also, while Fallujans were trapped in their city for years, it appears that they were being exposed to genotoxic pollution from the munitions used during the fighting. Residents began to notice increases in strange symptoms, especially in children, as early as 2006.⁴⁵ But due to the extreme difficulty of getting information out of Fallujah, the first report about the snowballing public health crisis in Fallujah did not come out until 2008.⁴⁶ This first attempt to report on the crisis was at the seventh session of the UN Human Rights



Council in the form of the report, *Prohibited Weapons Crisis: The Effects of Pollution on the Public Health in Fallujah* by Dr Muhamad Al-Darraji. This report was largely ignored. It wasn't until the first major study on the health crisis was published in 2010—*Cancer, Infant Mortality and Birth Sex-Ratio in Fallujah, Iraq 2005 - 2009*, by Busby, Hamdan, & Ariabi—that the issue received mainstream media attention in the UK and Europe.⁴⁷

The report presented at the seventh session of the Human Rights Council gave anecdotal evidence gathered at the Fallujah General Hospital. It included a stomach-turning collection of pictures of babies born with scaly skin, missing and deformed limbs, and horrifying tumors. Two years later, Dr Busby and his team of researchers sought to verify the claims in this report. What they found was that, in addition to shocking increases in pediatric cancers, there had also been an 18% reduction in male births. Such a finding is a well-known indication of genetic damage. The authors conclude that:

These results support the many reports of congenital illness and birth defects in Fallujah and suggest that there is evidence of genetic stress which appeared around 2004, one year before the effects began to show.

In a follow up study, in which Dr Busby was a co-author, hair, soil and water samples were taken from Fallujah and tested for the presence of heavy metals.⁴⁸ The researchers expected to find depleted uranium in the environmental samples. It is well known that the US used depleted uranium weapons in Iraq during the 1991 Gulf war; and Iraqis, at least, are well aware of the increases in cancers and infant mortality rates in the city of Basrah, which was heavily bombarded during Desert Storm. However, what the researchers found was not depleted uranium, but man-made, slightly enriched uranium.

Some have criticized the methodology of these studies, and they have used this as an excuse to dismiss the entire issue. But as other experts have noted:

The role of 'quick and dirty' studies like this one, conducted under difficult conditions, is not to inform policy, but rather to generate hypotheses about important questions when resources are not yet available and other research methods are not possible.⁴⁹

Dr. Busby's findings are complimented by the work of Dr. Dai Williams, an independent weapons researcher. Williams has been investigating what he calls "third generation uranium weapons".⁵⁰ He has found patents for weapon systems that could use undepleted uranium, or slightly enriched uranium, interchangeably with tungsten, either as a dense metal or as a reactive metal. Undepleted and slightly enriched uranium have also been found on other battlefields (Afghanistan and Lebanon).⁵¹ These findings lead researchers like Dr. Williams to believe that there is a new generation of weapons being used, possibly by the US and Israeli militaries, that could have serious indiscriminate health effects on the populations living near bombing targets.



One weapon system that may use uranium, in some form or another, is the SMAW-NE (Shoulder-fired Multipurpose Assault Weapon – Novel Explosive). This weapon was battle tested in for the first time in Fallujah during Operation Phantom Fury in 2004. It is a new thermobaric weapon that requires a reactive metal to create its high heat blast. But the possibility that this weapon system or any other could have possibly contributed to the current public health crisis in Fallujah has yet to be investigated.



There are also other possible sources of contamination besides uranium weapons. One recent study examines the possible contributions of mercury and lead to the health crisis in Iraq. *Metal Contamination and the Epidemic of Congenital Defects in Iraqi Cities*, by Al-Sabbak et al, compared the levels of lead and mercury in hair, nail and teeth samples from Fallujah and Basrah.⁵ The study found that the population

studied in Fallujah had been exposed to high levels of "two well-known neurotoxic metals, Pb and Hg".

In Basrah, the authors found even higher levels of lead exposure than in Fallujah. Basrah has the highest ever reported level of neural tube defects, and the numbers continue to climb. The authors of this study note:

Toxic metals such as mercury (Hg) and Pb are an integral part of war ammunitions and are extensively used in the making of bullets and bombs ... the bombardment of al-Basrah and Fallujah may have exacerbated public exposure to metals, possibly culminating in the current epidemic of birth defects.

All of these studies have received very little attention in the United States. But they did receive enough international attention to pressure the World Health Organization into conducting a study in collaboration with the Iraqi Ministry of Health on the rates of birth defects in Iraq's various provinces. The study was originally scheduled to be published in November 2012, but its release was delayed for several months. Finally, after much pressure from Iraqi doctors, public health researchers, and activists, the Iraqi MoH released a summary of their results which stated that,

[t]he rates for spontaneous abortion, stillbirths and congenital birth defects found in the study are consistent with or even lower than international estimates. The study provides no clear evidence to suggest an unusually high rate of congenital birth defects in Iraq.⁵³

The findings of this report came as a shock to many, since they contradicted what Iraqi doctors witness on a daily basis. Many claim that the methodology of the study was inadequate and that the conclusions were influenced by political pressure.⁵⁴ These claims are even supported by some who have worked intimately with the WHO in the past.⁵⁵

As Fallujah stands today, it is a devastated city. Its residents still carry the scars of war, either physical or emotional. They live under an oppressive government that ignores their wants and needs.⁵⁶ Their rates of cancer and birth defects are higher than those in Hiroshima after the atomic bombs.⁵⁷ And at every turn, Fallujans have been betrayed by the international community. Their suffering fell on blind eyes during the sieges of Fallujah, and today their public health crisis is not being addressed, due to the political pressure of governments who are more concerned with their power and prestige than with human wellbeing. In the United States the sieges of Fallujah are still widely celebrated. The suffering of Fallujans in the US is either not known or it is dismissed as anti-American propaganda. The best hope to bring the American perception more inline with the Iraqi reality is through honest scholarship and efforts to inform the American public about how the sieges of Fallujah affected civilians. Understanding the truth about US foreign policy in Fallujah is not just important from an American perspective for the sake of informing our future foreign policy decisions, but it is essential if Fallujans are to ever see justice. Their suffering must not be lost to relativism. It must be acknowledged as a fact, and Fallujans deserve accountability for that fact.

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