

Oil: A Blessing for Politicians and a Curse for the People of Basra

by [Azhar Al-Rubaie \(/experts/azhar-al-rubaie\)](#)

Jul 29, 2024

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/alnft-alraqy-nmt-llyasyyn-wnqmt-ly-skan-albsrt\)](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Azhar Al-Rubaie \(/experts/azhar-al-rubaie\)](#)

Azhar Al-Rubaie is a freelance journalist based in Iraq. His writing focuses on a variety of issues, including politics, health, society, wars, and human rights. Al-Rubaie is a contributor to Fikra Forum.



Brief Analysis

The deterioration of public health in oil extraction cities requires tangible actions to end the suffering of the affected people by providing specialized treatment centers funded by the social benefits from petroleum profits.

In June 2023, Iraq's Council of Representatives approved the federal budget for 2023, 2024, and 2025. The state has allocated 198.9 trillion dinars (\$153 billion) for each year, a staggering sum and the largest in the country's history. Although Iraq is a top oil-producing country, observers have been alarmed at this uptick in spending, and they have good reason to believe that these vast sums will not reach the citizens but instead fill the pockets of the corrupt. According to [Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index \(https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2023\)](https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2023), Iraq consistently ranks as one of the most corrupt governments, and despite the massive budgets approved in Baghdad, everyday Iraqis continue to suffer from weak infrastructure, lack of job opportunities, and poor services in essential sectors such as healthcare.

In the oil-rich city of Basra in Iraq's south, local residents living near oil sites complain about the high rates of cancer, respiratory illness, and nervous system diseases, along with the scarcity of medicines and poor healthcare in the public sector. The dearth of basic services frequently forces patients to travel abroad to countries like Iran, India, Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon, spending up to **\$6 million monthly**

[\(https://ar.shafaqna.com/AR/177340/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%8A%D9%86%D9%81%D9%82%D9%88%D9%86-6-%D9%85%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%8A%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%B4%D9%87%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%8B/\)](https://ar.shafaqna.com/AR/177340/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%8A%D9%86%D9%81%D9%82%D9%88%D9%86-6-%D9%85%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%8A%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%B4%D9%87%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%8B/) to receive medical treatment. This contributes to the waste of public funds and their diversion abroad, which some might use to justify the smuggling of hard currency, especially to Iran.

There is no data on cancer patients published on government websites, as health authorities deliberately withhold any information or data on the number of cancer patients, treating it as a sensitive issue that should not be discussed. Those who disclose any information to the media are punished. Nevertheless, doctors who appeared in a film broadcast by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) suggested a link between these cancers and oil extraction and refining in the area. The

human cost is in addition to the great toll the oil industry takes on the environment. Iraq's climate groans under the weight of pervasive corruption, and the country is now facing an environmental catastrophe that threatens the health and lives of future generations. In the absence of oversight and strict laws to regulate production quantities in line with global environmental standards, the Iraqi government announces increased production and the auctioning of several oil fields to major oil companies under licensing rounds, without heedless of the consequences. Every barrel extracted pollutes the land, water, and air, leaving behind irreparable environmental destruction.

Giant Fields Producing Oil and Diseases

Basra contains Iraq's largest oil fields, most notably the Rumaila field, which produces about 40% of Iraq's total oil, along with other fields listed below based on unofficial open-source data. Oil production numbers fluctuate occasionally due to various circumstances, but they are close to the figures below. These are the main oil-producing fields in Basra:

- Rumaila Field: The largest oil field in Iraq, producing about 1.4 million barrels of oil per day.
- West Qurna 1: Producing about 560,000 barrels of oil per day.
- West Qurna 2: Producing about 500,000 barrels of oil per day.
- Zubair Field: Producing about 220,000 barrels of oil per day.
- Majnoon Field: Producing about 450,000 barrels of oil per day.
- Luhais Field: Producing over 140,000 barrels of oil per day.
- Nahr Umr Field: Producing over 40,000 barrels of oil per day.

Satellite imagery confirms that Rumaila Field is one of the worst in the world for flaring associated gas, where toxic compounds may mix with the air during oil well and product fires. The resulting smoke cloud can rise several hundred meters and spread over hundreds of kilometers following the wind direction. The burning oil products produce a wide range of pollutants, such as soot (mainly carbon), gases (notably carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxides, volatile organic compounds [such as benzene], polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, hydrogen sulfide, and acid gases [like sulfuric acid]), posing **severe health risks (<https://www.who.int/ar/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/deliberate-events-chemical-release>)**.

Unsurprisingly, authorities try to prevent media from accessing Rumaila field. However, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) documented the environmental damage caused by flaring associated gas in the Rumaila Field, operated by British Petroleum (BP). The **film (<https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-63560279>)**, produced in 2022, features young man named Ali Hussein Jalud. The piece documents his daily life and constant suffering from toxic smoke inhalation, which caused him leukemia. Jalud died from the disease on April 21, 2023.

Jalud's family lives less than two kilometers from the oil production sites. Hussein Jalud, the deceased man's father claims his son's illness and death resulted from pollutants caused by extraction operations in the Rumaila Field, operated by BP and others, due to gas flaring near his home. The father is taking the first steps to sue BP for compensation for the environmental pollution that caused his son's death, according to an interview for this article.

Awaiting Justice

Jalud hopes that he can secure some modicum of accountability for his son's death, and he sees his family's tragedy as part of a larger phenomenon. He says: "I demand fair compensation for the loss of my son, even though compensation will not bring my son back to life, but it's a right we must obtain; I spent nearly 180 million Iraqi dinars (over \$137,000) during the treatment period inside and outside Iraq. My son Ali is not the only one who got cancer; dozens of others have been affected and died without their voices being heard. After my son appeared in the BBC film, no one, neither official nor unofficial bodies, nor even the oil companies in Rumaila, contacted us."

He adds: "The sight of oil flames and toxic gas smoke is a daily scene for me and my family. At dawn, when I go out to pray, I smell the toxic gas daily, which poses a danger to my health and my family's health. I lost Ali, and I don't want to lose more." He continued: "Unfortunately, the giant oil companies operating in Rumaila do not care about human health and the locals

living near the field. These companies should at least provide healthcare to the citizens and compensate those harmed by their daily and long-term oil activities.”

BP did not respond to the questions posed by the writer by the time of publishing the article.

The Rumaila area is not the only region where residents suffer from cancer and other diseases. Residents of the Nahran Omar area also experiences diseases and environmental pollution caused by the flaring of associated gas from oil production. Authorities occasionally promise to reduce production at this field; however, production remains at its peak, exacerbating pollution and its negative impact on the environment and public health.

In 2020, Ihsan Abdul-Jabbar, the former director-general of Basra Oil Company, told (<https://arabi21.com/story/1243588/%D8%AE%D9%81%D8%B6-%D8%A5%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%AC-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D9%81%D8%B7-%D8%A8%D8%AD%D9%82%D9%84-%D9%86%D9%87%D8%B1-%D8%A8%D9%86-%D8%B9%D9%85%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D9%8A-%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%AF%D9%86%D9%89-%D8%AD%D8%AF-%D9%85%D9%85%D9%83%D9%86>) the media that the Nahr Bin Omar field is one of the most controversial regarding oil pollutants and emissions. He instructed that crude oil production be minimized in the interest of environmental protection. In practice, the authorities did not reduce production.

Safaa Khalaf, an investigative journalist and independent researcher, said in an interview with the writer, "Iraqi environmental and protective regulations stipulate a distance of up to ten km between oil fields and residential areas. However, this is often ignored, reducing the distance to five km due to flexible procedures and the overlap of oil sites with inhabited areas, especially in rural areas. Additionally, these regulations have remained outdated, influenced by an old bureaucratic perspective that initially assumed inhabited areas were outside the geographic scope of extraction activities due to low population density and central oil investments outside cities. Back then, decades ago, the expansion into nearby or within inhabited areas was not considered. Furthermore, Iraq experienced long periods of production halts or reductions due to successive wars and strict international sanctions, affecting the review of environmental and protective regulations."

Legal Loopholes and Evasion of Responsibility

Khalaf added, "Oil production contracts (licensing rounds) require emission-causing entities to compensate affected people and fund local environmental improvement projects. The government's nationally determined contribution (<https://www.fao.org/faolex/results/details/en/c/LEX-FAOC205646/>) (NDC) document on climate change suggested encouraging oil and gas companies to report emissions transparently and reliably and to launch campaigns to measure methane emissions. However, companies dominating extraction fields have invented legal loopholes with the help of the central government to evade responsibility for disclosing gas flaring rates and the impacts of its pollutants, as well as the destructive environmental effects of the entire extraction sector."

Khalaf noted that there is no foreseeable intention to reduce production or close highly polluted sites as a responsible and rational action toward the local environment. Iraq strongly opposed the proposal to reduce fossil fuel production in the COP 28 negotiations and instead announced fifth and sixth licensing rounds, which increased fossil pollutant mapping by expanding petroleum activity into cities and inhabited areas. Thus, Basra might be the most glaring example of the Iraqi state's reckless and unclean policies.

Article 111 (https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iraq_2005#s681) of the Iraqi Constitution states that oil and gas are the property of the Iraqi people in all regions and governorates, consistent with international law, which considers natural resources the property of the people. At the same time, major companies are obligated to undertake projects and provide various services to distribute oil wealth to the broader population. However, these funds are often directed to smaller initiatives, without focusing on more critical projects to treat cancer, which is spreading alarmingly in Basra Governorate.

To defend his son's case, Jalud participated in the Conference of the Parties to the Climate Convention in Sharm El-Sheikh in November 2022 and in a similar meeting in Dubai to raise awareness about the pollution caused by oil fields in his city. However, his presence, according to him, did not garner any governmental attention or accountability for the companies or the imposition of strict laws to reduce oil pollution.

Jalud says, "My family and I have lived here for years; at that time, oil production was minimal, and no foreign companies operated in our area. But after the entry of oil companies, including BP, oil production increased along with the toxic gas emissions that took my son Ali's life. Therefore, I hope that hospitals and specialized cancer treatment centers will be built in the Rumaila area. The government and health authorities should conduct examinations and surveys of local residents to confirm whether they are affected by diseases. Due to the poor economic conditions, lack of awareness, and fear of hearing about their cancer diagnosis, citizens are hesitant to visit health centers."

Khalaf believes that Basra has now just a giant oil field that is expanding daily at the expense of residents' health and the local environment's deterioration and destruction. Agricultural land and green space are continuously being eroded in favor of expanding extraction activities. In short, Basra is being made increasingly unlivable, but certain authorities and companies are willing to sacrifice citizens' wellbeing for more production.

The Iraqi government's silence, despite the massive oil revenue-dependent budgets, is exacerbating Iraqis' suffering and turning their benefit from "black gold" into a curse. The deterioration of public health in oil extraction cities requires tangible national actions to end the suffering of the affected people by providing specialized treatment centers funded by the social benefits from petroleum profits. Additionally, strict environmental regulations must be imposed on oil companies to achieve two main goals: environmental justice through reduced production and compensation for victims of environmentally and health-destructive oil activities. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking Narratives around Western Boycotts and Unemployment in Jordan](#)

Jul 29, 2024

◆
Mohammed Abu Dalhoun

[\(/policy-analysis/unpacking-narratives-around-western-boycotts-and-unemployment-jordan\)](#)

ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Martin Indyk, Tireless U.S. Envoy Who Saw the 'Promised Land' Ending the Israel-Palestinian Conflict](#)

Jul 28, 2024

◆
Dennis Ross

[\(/policy-analysis/martin-indyk-tireless-us-envoy-who-saw-promised-land-ending-israel-palestinian\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The Islamic State's External Operations Are More Than Just ISKP

Jul 26, 2024



Aaron Y. Zelin

(/policy-analysis/islamic-states-external-operations-are-more-just-iskp)

TOPICS

Energy & Economics (/policy-analysis/energy-economics)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iraq (/policy-analysis/iraq)