

Gaza: A Death Camp ?

Interview with Dr. Thabet El Masri

By [Silvia Cattori](#)

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Thabet El Masri, is the Director of the Intensive Care Unit at the Shifa Hospital, a public institution in the Gaza Strip. He replies here to the questions of Silvia Cattori about the recent increase in the number of babies being born with birth defects.

Silvia Cattori: In June, you started to be concerned by an increase in the number of babies born with birth defects. We would be very interested to have your medical assessment and to know the result of the study you made of this troubling phenomenon. Can you tell us the ratio of prenatal and postnatal birth defects ten months after the attacks on Gaza in comparison with the same period in 2008, in terms of the number of cases involved?

Thabet El Masri: Yes I have been following the continuing phenomenon of babies born with a birth defect. I have calculated the number of babies with congenital defects born in July, August, and September, 2009. I have compared these three months with the same months in 2008.

Here are the figures: In July 2009, there were in Shifa Hospital 15 such cases, compared to 10 in 2008; in August 2009, there were 20 cases, compared to 10 in 2008 ; and in September 2009, 15 such babies were born, compared to 11 in 2008. The average number of births in Shifa Hospital is about 1'100 per month.

Silvia Cattori: When this report came out it caused a lot of emotion and concern. Many people immediately attributed the increase in birth defects in aborted fetuses and newborns to the Israeli army's use of white phosphorous shells. Do they have a case?

Thabet El Masri: We can suspect, but we cannot confirm, that it is the use of chemical weapons by Israel that caused this increase in birth defects.

Silvia Cattori: Are the babies with birth defects all from the refugee population subjected to Israeli shelling? Which area do the mothers come from?

Thabet El Masri: The babies suffering from birth defects come from all over the strip. But half of the women who gave birth to babies with problems come from the Jabaliya refugee camp.

Silvia Cattori: What can you do to reassure pregnant women in Gaza who are now very worried?

Thabet El Masri: Actually nothing. There is nothing we can do to guarantee that their babies will be normal. How could we prevent the presence of chemicals which can cause birth

defects?

Silvia Cattori: *Are there embryologists in Gaza who are able to make genetic tests?*

Thabet El Masri: We are unfortunately not equipped to carry out genetic tests to see if birth defects are due to genetic factors alone and not to chemicals. In the end, it is a problem of genetics, but chemicals could well be responsible for the mutations.

Silvia Cattori: *What about the international researchers who took samples in 2006 to be tested in European laboratories? Have there been any results yet?*

Thabet El Masri: How can we solve this problem? If chemical factors are responsible, it is very difficult to prove. How can you prove that chemicals were at the root of the mutations? How can we be sure that the Israelis used prohibited substances?

Silvia Cattori: *We understand that, as a doctor, you are deeply concerned and that, in the present desperate situation, you urgently need international support?*

Thabet El Masri: Yes. I would like to suggest something that would help us, without draining our limited financial resources in genetic research, which requires a huge amount of money. Simply put, it would be extremely helpful to convince the Israelis not to repeat the chemical war of this past winter again.

Silvia Cattori: *What kinds of pathologies do you observe in this summer's newborns? Can you give us some examples of the birth defects?*

Thabet El Masri: You find problems of the central nervous system, hydrocephalus, anencephaly and other defects like congenital heart disease and obstructions of the digestive tract. Kidney problems are very frequent. Visible malformations are rare: the problems are usually internal.

Now you see what problems we have to face. The mothers are helpless; we have no answers for them. They know that we are all alone in this situation. They can only pray. That is the only thing left to them.

Silvia Cattori: *You have no contacts outside?*

Thabet El Masri: We have absolutely no contacts outside. I have given you an overview of the main problem. As I said, there is a probability that chemicals might be one cause of the upward trend in birth defects because they have increased since the assault in December and January. However, this conclusion is impossible to prove.

Silvia Cattori: *Thank you very much.*

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Silvia Cattori is a journalist based in Switzerland.

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