

War, Iraq and the Dead

Today, there is much discussion about 'winding down' military operations in Iraq. The new U.S. President has promised to do so while alluding to the possibility that the war will end and end successfully. But for most, especially most U.S. citizens, the war is likely already over since it is rarely mentioned in mainstream news having been overshadowed by reports on the end of the recession, sports, celebrities, tech gadgets, and Christmas shopping. But that would mean that they were aware of the Iraq War in the first place, and evidence seems to indicate otherwise. The degree to which this is true is perhaps best reflected in the attempt to determine and understand a simple fact: how many Iraqi civilians have been killed since the U.S.-led invasion in 2003.

One group, Iraq Body Count, which calculates casualties by confirming and cross-referencing international media reports, put the figure somewhere between 89,369 and 97,568 as of October, 2008.¹ In a cluster sample survey published in the British medical journal, *The Lancet*, it was estimated that (through September, 2004) over 100,000 'excess' deaths (defined as fatalities above the pre-invasion civilian death rate) had occurred due to the invasion.² In another study, organized by the Johns Hopkins University (U.S.) and Al Mustansiriya University (Iraq), it was estimated that as of 2006, approximately 654,965 excess deaths had occurred since the invasion.³ Another, released in September 2007 by the British polling firm Opinion Research, put the number at a staggering 1,220,580.⁴

Here is where it gets interesting. In a 2007 poll in the U.S., when asked to estimate the number of Iraqi casualties, the median answer given by respondents was 9,890.⁵

It would seem that there is an incredibly large gulf between reality and perception. This gulf is perhaps only understood in the difference between numbers like 9,890 and 1.2 million. It is also very unsettling to think that, despite all the technology available to us, we have no idea how many people have been killed in one of the first, major wars of the 21st century. When (and if) the U.S. finally leaves Iraq, I am sure that for many, the war would have long been over and will be considered to have been won.

Dr. David Clearwater, October 2009.

1 The Iraq Body Count website is available at: <<http://www.iraqbodycount.org/>>.

2 Roberts, Les, Riyadh Lafta, Richard Garfield, Jamal Khudhairi, and Gilbert Burnham. "Mortality Before and After the 2003 Invasion of Iraq: Cluster Sample Survey." *The Lancet* (Online). October 29, 2009. URL: <<http://image.thelancet.com/extras/04art10342web.pdf>>.

3 Burnham, Gilbert, Shannon Doocy, Elizabeth Dzeng, Riyadh Lafta, and Les Roberts. "The Human Cost of the War in Iraq: A Mortality Study, 2002-2006." Bloomberg School of Public Health, Johns Hopkins University and School of Medicine, Al Mustansiriya University; 2006. Available at: <<http://mit.edu/humancostiraq/reports/human-cost-war-101106.pdf>>.

4 A press release on the study, as well as tables and data, is available at: <http://www.opinion.co.uk/Newsroom_details.aspx?NewsId=78>.

5 Associated Press. "Americans unaware of Iraqi death toll: Poll shows knowledge of U.S. dead, but huge underestimation of Iraqis." February 24, 2007. Available at: <<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/17310383>>.