



Iraqi Civilian Casualties Estimates

Hannah Fischer
Information Research Specialist

January 12, 2009

Congressional Research Service

7-5700

www.crs.gov

RS22537

Summary

This report presents various governmental and non-governmental estimates of Iraqi civilian deaths. The Department of Defense (DOD) regularly updates total U.S. military deaths statistics from Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), as reflected in CRS Report RS21578, *Iraq: U.S. Casualties*, by Susan G. Chesser. However, no Iraqi or U.S. government office regularly releases publically available statistics on Iraqi civilian deaths. Statistics on Iraqi civilian deaths are sometimes available through alternative sources, such as nonprofit organizations, or through statements made by officials to the press. Because these estimates are based on varying time periods and have been created using differing methodologies, readers should exercise caution when using these statistics and should look on them as guideposts rather than as statements of fact. See also CRS Report RS22532, *Iraqi Police and Security Forces Casualties Estimates*, by Hannah Fischer. This report will be updated as needed.

Contents

Government Estimates of Iraqi Civilian Deaths.....	1
Other Estimates of Iraqi Civilian Deaths.....	3

Figures

Figure 1. Estimated Iraqi Civilian Deaths, January 2006 to August 2008	1
--	---

Tables

Table 1. Other Iraqi Civilian Dead and Wounded Estimates	3
--	---

Contacts

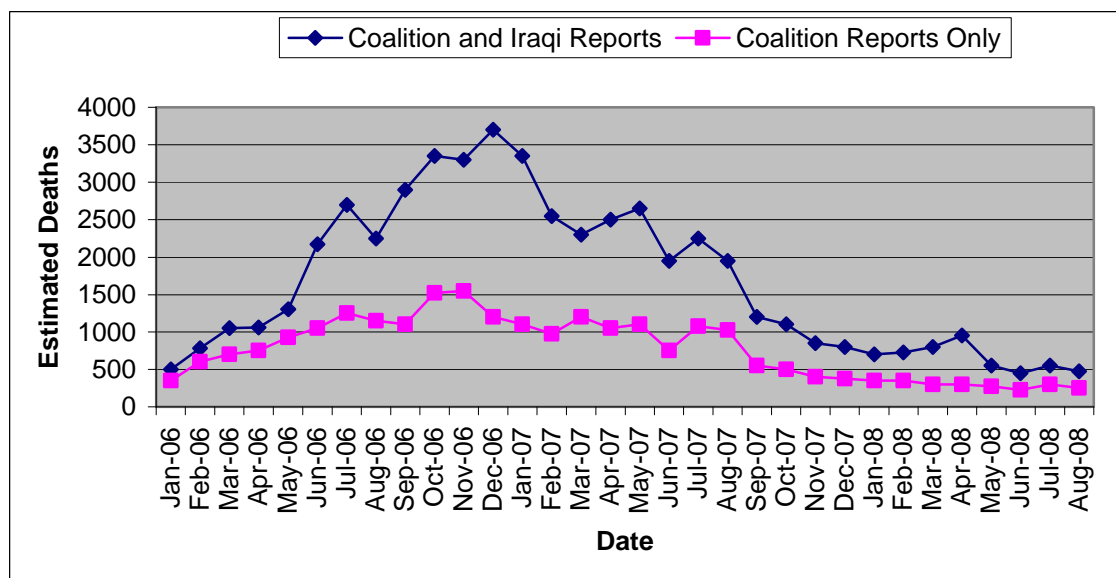
Author Contact Information	5
----------------------------------	---

Government Estimates of Iraqi Civilian Deaths

The Department of Defense (DOD) has not released a composite estimate of Iraqi civilian deaths during Operation Iraqi Freedom. However, in the report *Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq*, it has released a chart containing two separate estimates of Iraqi civilian deaths from January 2006 to August 2008.¹ The first estimate is derived from a compilation of coalition and Iraqi reports of civilian deaths while the second estimate is derived from the Iraq Significant Activities (SIGACTS) III database, which includes coalition reports only. The DOD noted in the December 2007 update of *Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq* that “host nation reports capture some types of deaths on which the Coalition does not have visibility, in particular, murders and deaths in locations where Coalition forces are not present.”²

While the chart provides a guideline to Iraqi civilian deaths trends, the specific data used to create the chart have not been released. Using the DOD chart as a guideline, therefore, CRS has reproduced an approximation of the original chart in the figure below.

Figure 1. Estimated Iraqi Civilian Deaths, January 2006 to August 2008



Source: CRS rendition of DOD graph, as derived from *Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq*, http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/pdfs/9010_Report_to_Congress_Sep_08.pdf. Multi-National Corps - Iraq Strategic Plans Assessments Iraq Significant Activities (SIGACTS) III database (Coalition Reports Only) and (Coalition and Iraqi Reports) as of August 2008.

¹ U.S. Department of Defense, Multi-National Corps-Iraq, *Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq: September 2008 Report to Congress in Accordance with the Department of Defense Appropriations Act 2007 (Section 9010)*, June 2008, p. 22, at http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/pdfs/9010_Report_to_Congress_Sep_08.pdf.

² U.S. Department of Defense, Multi-National Corps-Iraq, *Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq: December 2007 Report to Congress in Accordance with the Department of Defense Appropriations Act 2007 (Section 9010)*, December 2007, p. 18, at <http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/pdfs/FINAL-SecDef%20Signed-20071214.pdf>.

For some time, the United Nations has attempted to release comprehensive statistics on Iraqi civilian deaths. From August 2005 to March 2007, the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) published a series of quarterly reports on human rights in Iraq that included sections on Iraqi civilian casualties. On April 25, 2007, however, the Iraqi government announced its intention to cease providing civilian casualty figures to the United Nations.³ Ivana Vuco, a UN human rights officer, stated, “[Iraqi] government officials had made clear during discussions that they believed releasing high casualty numbers would make it more difficult to quell unrest.”⁴ The UNAMI report on human rights released on October 11, 2007 and concerning the period between April - June 2007 expressed regret that “for this reporting period, [UNAMI] was again unable to persuade the Government of Iraq to release data on casualties compiled by the Ministry of Health and its other institutions. UNAMI continues to maintain that making such data public is in the public interest.”⁵ UNAMI did not publish another human rights report until December 2, 2008, when it issued a report covering the human rights situation in Iraq from January 1, 2008 – June 30, 2008.⁶ This latest report provides a list of instances of bombings in which civilians were killed, but does not give a comprehensive estimate of civilian deaths. The report’s first recommendation to the government of Iraq is to “Issue on a regular basis mortality data compiled by the Ministry of Health, based on information received from all governorates and statistics kept at the Medico-Legal Institute in Baghdad, together with details of the methodology used to calculate the figures.”⁷

In a November 2008 statement in front of the United Nations Security Council, Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad announced that the security situation in Iraq had “significantly improved since June 2007.”⁸ According to the Ambassador, the number of overall attacks since June 2007 had decreased by 86% and Iraqi civilian deaths due to violence had decreased by 84% in the same time period. The non-profit Iraq Body Count also reported a decrease in civilian deaths in 2008; according to their database, 8,315-9,028, or approximately 25 people a day, Iraqi civilians died due to violence in 2008.⁹ By comparison, 22,671-24,295 (or approximately 67 a day) civilian deaths were added to their database in 2007, and 25,774-27,599 civilian deaths (or approximately 76 a day) were added in 2006.

However, the reported decrease has not been entirely consistent on a month-to-month basis. The *New York Times* reports that the Iraqi Health Ministry counted a total of 148 civilian deaths for November 2008, compared with 118 deaths in October and 156 in September.¹⁰

³ Tina Susman, “Iraq won’t give casualty figures to U.N.,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 26, 2007, p.12.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ United Nations Assistance Mission to Iraq, *Human Rights Report, 1 April - 20 June 2007*, at <http://www.uniraq.org/FileLib/misc/HR%20Report%20Apr%20Jun%202007%20EN.pdf>.

⁶ United Nations Assistance Mission to Iraq, *Human Rights Report, 1 January – 30 June 2008*, at http://www.uniraq.org/documents/UNAMI_Human_Rights_Report_January_June_2008_EN.pdf.

⁷ United Nations Assistance Mission to Iraq, *Human Rights Report, 1 January – 30 June 2008*, at http://www.uniraq.org/documents/UNAMI_Human_Rights_Report_January_June_2008_EN.pdf, p. 3.

⁸ Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, “Statement by Ambassador Khalilzad on Situation in Iraq: Ambassador’s Report to U.N. Security Council on Multi-National Force in Iraq,” November 14, 2008, <http://www.america.gov/st/texttrans-english/2008/November/20081114135331eafas0.3025934.html>.

⁹ Iraq Body Count, “Post-surge violence: It’s extent and nature,” December 28, 2008, at <http://www.iraqbodycount.org/analysis/numbers/surge-2008/>.

¹⁰ Alissa J. Rubin, “Civilian death toll in Iraq increased in November,” *International Herald Tribune*, December 2, 2008.

Other Estimates of Iraqi Civilian Deaths

Table 1, below, provides Iraqi civilian dead and wounded estimates from non-governmental sources. These estimates are based on varying time periods and have been created using differing methodologies, and therefore readers should exercise caution when using these statistics.

Table 1. Other Iraqi Civilian Dead and Wounded Estimates

Iraq Body Count March 19, 2003 - January 7, 2009	90,253 - 98,521 ^a
Iraq Coalition Casualty Count April 28, 2005 - January 7, 2009	44,276 ^b
Brookings Iraq Index May 2003 - January 5, 2009	108,707 ^c
The Associated Press April 2005 - January 5, 2009	44,971 dead ^c 51,540 wounded ^c
The Iraq Family Health Study (the "WHO study") March 2003 - June 2006	151,000 ^e
<i>The Lancet</i> , "Mortality after the 2003 Invasion of Iraq" March 19, 2003 - July 31, 2006	426,369 - 793,663 ^f

Source: Prepared by CRS with data from noted sources.

- a. Iraq Body Count, January 7, 2009, at <http://www.iraqbodycount.org/>
- b. Iraq Coalition Casualties Count, January 7, 2009, at <http://icasualties.org/oif/iraqidaths.aspx>.
- c. Brookings, "Iraq Index: Tracking Variables of Reconstruction and Security in Post-Saddam Iraq," January 5, 2009, at <http://www.brookings.edu/saban/~media/Files/Centers/Saban/Iraq%20Index/index.pdf>.
- d. CRS communication with Associated Press, January 5, 2009.
- e. Iraq Family Health Survey Study Group, "Violence-Related Mortality in Iraq from 2002 to 2006," *The New England Journal of Medicine*, January 31, 2008, pp. 484-492.
- f. Gilbert Burnham, Riyadh Lafta, Shannon Doocy et al., "Mortality After the 2003 Invasion of Iraq: A Cross-Sectional Cluster Sample Survey," *The Lancet*, October 21, 2006, 368 (9545), pp. 1421-1429.

Three cluster studies of violence-related mortality in Iraq have recently been undertaken. The first two studies were both conducted by researchers from Johns Hopkins University and Baghdad's Al-Mustansiriya University and are commonly referred to in the press as "the *Lancet* studies" because they were published in the British medical journal of that name. The third study was conducted by a consortium of researchers, many of whom are associated with the World Health Organization, and so the study is commonly referred to as "the WHO study" in the press.

The first of these studies, published in 2004, used a cluster sample survey of households in Iraq to develop an estimate ranging from 8,000 to 194,000 civilian casualties due to violent deaths since the start of the war.¹¹ This report has come under some criticism for its methodology, which may not have accounted for the long-term negative health effects of the Saddam Hussein era. Former

¹¹ Les Roberts, Riyadh Lafta, Richard Garfield et al., "Mortality Before and After the 2003 Invasion of Iraq: Cluster Sample Survey," *The Lancet*, October 29, 2004, 364 (9448), pp. 1857-1864.

British Foreign Minister Jack Straw has written a formal Ministerial Response rejecting the findings of the first *Lancet* report on the grounds that the data analyzed were inaccurate.¹²

The second study, published in 2006, increased the number of clusters surveyed from 33 to 47 and reported an estimate of between 426,369 and 793,663 Iraqi civilian deaths from violent causes since the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom.¹³ This article, too, has sparked some controversy.¹⁴ Stephen Moore, a consultant for Gorton Moore International, objected to the methods used by the researchers, commenting in the *Wall Street Journal* that the *Lancet* article lacked some of the hallmarks of good research: a small margin of error, a record of the demographics of respondents (so that one can be sure one has captured a fair representation of an entire population), and a large number of cluster points.¹⁵ On the other hand, documents written by the UK Ministry of Defence's chief scientific advisor have come to light, which called the survey's methods "close to best practice" and "robust."¹⁶

In the third and most recent study, a team of investigators from the Federal Ministry of Health in Baghdad, the Kurdistan Ministry of Planning, the Kurdistan Ministry of Health, the Central Organization for Statistics and Information Technology in Baghdad, and the World Health Organization formed the Iraq Family Health Survey (IFHS) Study Group to research violence-related mortality in Iraq.¹⁷ In their nationally representative cluster study, interviewers visited 89.4% of 1,086 household clusters; the household response rate was 96.2%. They concluded that there had been an estimated 151,000 violence-related deaths from March 2003 through June 2006 and that violence was the main cause of death for men between the ages of 15 and 59 years during the first three years after the 2003 invasion. This study seems to be widely cited for violence-related mortality rates in Iraq. Neither the *Lancet* studies nor the IFHS study make an effort to distinguish different victims of violence, such as civilians versus police or security force members.

The Associated Press has kept a database of Iraqi civilian and security forces dead and wounded since April 2005. According to its database, between April 2005 and January 5, 2009, 44,971 Iraqi civilians have died and 51,540 have been wounded.¹⁸

A number of nonprofit groups have released unofficial estimates of Iraqi civilian deaths. The Iraq Body Count (IBC) is one source often cited by the media; it bases its online casualty estimates on media reports of casualties, some of which may involve security forces as well as civilians. As of January 7, 2009, the IBC estimated that between 90,253 and 98,521 civilians had died as a result

¹² Jack Straw, Written U.K. Ministerial Statement Responding to a Lancet Study on Iraqi Casualty Numbers, November 16, 2004, at <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/newsroom/latest-news/?view=News&id=1541252>.

¹³ Gilbert Burnham, Riyadh Lafta, Shannon Doocy et al., "Mortality After the 2003 Invasion of Iraq: A Cross-Sectional Cluster Sample Survey," *The Lancet*, October 21, 2006, 368 (9545), pp. 1421-1429.

¹⁴ Sabrina Tavernise and Donald G. McNeil, Jr., "Iraqi Dead May Total 600,000, Study Says," *New York Times*, October 11, 2006, p. A16.

¹⁵ Steven E. Moore, "655,000 War Dead?," *Wall Street Journal*, October 18, 2006, p. A20.

¹⁶ *Newsday*, "High Death Toll Backed," March 27, 2007, p. A25.

¹⁷ Iraq Family Health Survey Study Group, "Violence-Related Mortality in Iraq from 2002 to 2006," *The New England Journal of Medicine*, January 31, 2008, pp. 484-492.

¹⁸ CRS discussion with Associated Press, August 10, 2008.

of military action.¹⁹ The IBC documents each of the casualties it records with a media source and provides a minimum and a maximum estimate.

The Brookings Institution has used modified numbers from the UN *Human Rights Report*, the Iraq Body Count, General Petraeus's congressional testimony given on September 10-11, 2007, and other sources to develop its own composite estimate for Iraqi civilians who have died by violence. By combining all of these sources by date, the Brookings Institution estimates that between May 2003 and January 5, 2009, 108,707 Iraqi civilians have died.²⁰

Finally, the Iraq Coalition Casualty Count (ICCC) is another well-known nonprofit group that tracks Iraqi civilian and Iraqi security forces deaths using an IBC-like method of posting media reports of deaths. ICCC, like IBC, is prone to the kind of errors likely when using media reports for data: some deaths may not be reported in the media, while other deaths may be reported more than once. The ICCC does have one rare feature: it separates police and soldier deaths from civilian deaths. The ICCC estimates that there were 44,276 civilian deaths from April 28, 2005 through January 7, 2009.²¹

Author Contact Information

Hannah Fischer
Information Research Specialist
hfischer@crs.loc.gov, 7-8989

¹⁹ Iraq Body Count at <http://www.iraqbodycount.net>. IBC is a nongovernmental organization managed by researchers and volunteers.

²⁰ Brookings Institution, *Iraq Index: Tracking Reconstruction and Security in Post-Saddam Iraq*, January 5, 2009, p. 4, at <http://www.brookings.edu/saban/~media/Files/Centers/Saban/Iraq%20Index/index.pdf>.

²¹ Iraq Coalition Casualty Count at <http://icasualties.org/oif/IraqiDeaths.aspx>. ICCC is a nongovernmental organization managed by researchers and volunteers.