

Mortality before and after the invasion of Iraq in 2003

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In this week's *Lancet*, Les Roberts and colleagues show that the death toll from the invasion and occupation of Iraq is about 98 000 civilians, and it might be considerably higher. The deaths are mostly related to air strikes.

After this survey was reported, politicians reacted promptly—casting doubt on the findings and questioning the methodology used. They frequently referred to the Iraq Body Count Database,¹ implying that it more accurately reflects the civilian casualties than other reports. The figures on the Iraq Body Count Database include about 7350 deaths caused by the coalition's major-combat phase, which ended on May 1, 2003, and about 16 352 Iraqi civilian deaths by Nov 1, 2004. These numbers differ considerably from those reported by Roberts and colleagues, so where does the truth lie?

The Iraq Body Count is an independent public database; it counts media-reported civilian deaths caused by the military action of the USA and its allies since the invasion of Iraq.¹ The site is based on the work of Marc Herold, an economist from the University of New Hampshire who did a similar running count of casualties in the war in Afghanistan. It has been Herold's view that the Iraqi count is probably too low,² because it only included incidents that were reported by at least two news organisations. In Iraq, thousands of violent incidents are never reported; the occupation authority's press officer does not record attacks that kill civilians unless they involve loss of life among coalition forces as well.³

I was in Baghdad for 5 weeks in May, 2003. In my first 2 weeks there were daily battles between US soldiers and Iraqi gunmen, particularly in the Adheymia district. When a shot was fired at US troops, it almost always led to random shooting by US troops at anyone at the site. In one of these incidents, 60 Iraqi civilians, mainly women and children, died in a shopping centre. The media did not mention this incident.

In the UK, government ministers have insisted that they do not have official figures for Iraqi civilian casualties. They repeated Tommy Franks' (US Central Command) statement that they "do not do body counts".¹

It is important to measure the number of civilian deaths accurately. Such statistics remind all parties to respect the principles of humanitarian law, regardless of military might. The war in Iraq has been executed in the name of, and on behalf of, the Iraqi people. It was supposed to rid them of the dictator responsible for the violent and unjust death of thousands of Iraqi civilians over 30 years.

We are also led to believe that the war machine is so advanced and precision bombing is now so successful that civilian deaths are minimal.³ We need evidence-based information that this assurance is not misleading, because in reality heavy bombardment of densely populated cities will inevitably kill innocent civilians.

We were given assurances that civilian deaths were minimised in 1991, but it is alleged⁴ that in the Gulf War, just 3% of 250 000 bombs were precision-guided. That figure jumped to 30% in the 1999 bombing of Yugoslavia, and to nearly 70% during the Afghan campaign. One should wonder, where did the rest land? By one estimate, the number of civilians killed per bomb might have been four times higher in Afghanistan compared with Yugoslavia.⁴

We need a mechanism to ensure that, in the confusion of war, factions do not lose sight of international laws and human rights. The Geneva Convention requires those who engage in military activity to focus on civilians' rights from the start. Christian Aid's Roger Riddell said: "I am worried about a line of questioning which suggests we do the war and then worry about the humanitarian consequences after."⁵

Whatever figure is quoted for deaths, it seems that the civilian casualties of the war in Iraq run into many thousands and the number is still mounting. What is undisputed is that thousands of families in Iraq have lost loved ones to violent deaths. The psychological effect⁶ of the shock-and-awe heavy bombardment and what it implies for the Iraqi nation will only become clear when Iraqis have the chance to think and life returns to some degree of normality, which might be a long time from now.

Les Roberts and colleagues have rightly recognised the impressive efforts of the medical teams in Iraq, despite the

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difficult circumstances. This recognition is welcomed. Before 1991, Iraq had one of the best national health-care systems in the Middle East.⁷ Its hospitals were equipped with state-of-the-art equipment and medical care was free. Iraq has around 9000 doctors; most of the senior doctors are members or fellows of the UK Royal Colleges.

After the first Gulf War in 1991, sanctions targeted materials related to nutrition, health, and education. Any items that could be used by both civilians and soldiers could be sanctioned. The sanctions lasted until 2003. Saddam Hussein used the sanctions to suppress the Iraqi people further, which caused the health of Iraqi civilians to deteriorate dramatically.⁸ The vulnerable were most affected, mainly women and children; more than half of Iraq's 24.5 million people are aged under 18.^{6,9}

One of the strengths of Roberts and colleagues' work is that it directly surveyed the people of Iraq, whose voices are now being heard. Personal interviews during wartime might well be subject to bias, but as the authors discuss, such bias is unlikely to underestimate deaths. In the Iraqi culture, the very sick and the dying are cared for at home and by their families. Home births are also the norm. Infants born alive and those who survive the first few weeks are more likely to be registered, unlike babies who are stillborn, have congenital abnormalities, or die in infancy. Therefore it is difficult to use infant mortality as an indicator of the population's health. Although sad, it is not surprising that infant and child mortality after the invasion has increased. Medical supplies are inadequate. Access to hospitals remains difficult, and interruptions of electricity have destroyed stored medicines, including immunisation supplies and insulin.

Roberts and colleagues' bravery should be acknowledged. They did the survey under difficult and dangerous circumstances. Welcoming a stranger into your home at any time without need for an appointment is part of the Iraqi culture. The speed with which they completed the survey and the exceptional amount of data they collected and processed in a short time is a credit to the interviewers and to the determination of the Iraqi civilians to inform the international community of their plight.

It is shameful that the international community and the medical establishment in the UK have stayed silent in the face of the continuous and preventable loss of innocent lives in Iraq. The voices of the few who have spoken were lost among the silent majority. International agencies, such as Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), have sharply criticised the USA for its dereliction of duty. "Urgent medical needs are not being addressed and disorganisation is posing a threat to the health of people in the country",¹⁰ said the group. MSF again demanded that the US-led coalition, as the occupying power, immediately fulfil its obligation to provide for the medical needs of the Iraqi people, which it has not yet done.¹⁰ How much greater would the effect be if the Royal Colleges in the UK united in demanding that our

Government act? The Colleges could help rebuild the medical establishment in Iraq with which they had a close link until 1991.

As we wait for the politicians to consider the evidence in this survey, Falluja was surrounded and was under attack by air and land. Its main hospital has been bombed, medical and other supplies have been cut, and the world watched. The number of civilian casualties is uncertain!

Speaking about the media coverage of the war in Iraq at the Media at War conference this year, Lt Col Richard Long said, "Frankly our job is to win the war. Part of that is information warfare. So we are going to attempt to dominate the information environment".¹¹ The Baghdad bureau of Aljazeera, one of the main, albeit controversial, Arab media news networks, was closed in August 2004.¹² Therefore the world will watch mainly through the occupier's eye. How does this reflect on democracy and freedom of media?

I hope this survey will help raise awareness of the humanitarian situation facing the Iraqi people and remind the international community of its responsibilities. We are told Iraq is on its way to democracy. A new Iraq with a newly imposed identity has to emerge, and for that to happen, the unique identity of Iraq, Mesopotamia, the cradle of civilisation, has been violently stripped. And the free world is still watching.

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I declare that I have no conflict of interest.

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