

Civilian Deaths in Iraq: Iraq's citizens have a right to know

Iraq's beleaguered citizens deserve to be told the numbers of lost human lives they have paid for a war in their name

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Iraq's citizens have a right to know

Last week, Iraq Body Count (IBC), an organisation set up with the aim of tracking civilian deaths in Iraq, released its [Dossier of Civilian Casualties 2003-2005](#). The conclusion: 24865 civilians have died since the war in Iraq began, most in violent circumstances.

Compiled from English-language news reports detailing Iraqi casualties and deaths, this calculation provides an absolute minimum number of non-military lives lost and resolves some of the uncertainty of [previously published studies](#). But the figure is necessarily an underestimate. The IBC database, from which data for the dossier were drawn, lists only those deaths reported by two or more news agencies. Incidents for which there was no journalistic observer are therefore not counted. Had the Coalition's military forces agreed to help compile an accurate body count, the dataset could have been far more complete. But they have so far refused to do so.

Defending the Coalition decision not to count civilian deaths, a UK Government spokesperson protested in a written statement to the House of Commons that the Ministry of Defence had "no methodology which would allow us to produce accurate estimates". Yet a letter circulated by former Director General of the Army Medical Services Major General Louis Lillywhite, and seen by *The Lancet*, reveals that the Army's medical corps certainly has the capacity for data collection. Thanks to strengthening of medical infrastructure during the past 2 years, recruiting is "buoyant" and all operational commitments placed upon the services have been met.

IBC compiled a credible list of deaths using just news reports and computers; the fact that the Coalition, equipped with a robust and expanding medical division, has not done so is an indefensible omission—and makes a mockery of international law. The adamant refusal of the USA and its partner countries to keep count of Iraqi deaths is a stance that renders farcical the Geneva Conventions' principle that invading forces have a duty to make every effort to protect civilian lives. How can the Coalition attest that it respects this obligation if it refuses to collect data to prove it?

The US-led Coalition that instigated the war claims to have acted on behalf of the Iraqi people. At the very least, Iraq's beleaguered citizens deserve to be told the true price—in numbers of lost human lives—they have paid for a conflict undertaken in their names.

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