

Iraq's death toll is far worse than our leaders admit

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The U.S. and Britain have triggered an episode more deadly than the Rwandan genocide

On both sides of the Atlantic, a process of spinning science is preventing a serious discussion about the state of affairs in Iraq.

The government in Iraq claimed last month that since the 2003 invasion between 40,000 and 50,000 violent deaths have occurred. Few have pointed out the absurdity of this statement.

There are three ways we know it is a gross underestimate. First, if it were true, including suicides, South Africa, Colombia, Estonia, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Lithuania and Russia have experienced higher violent death rates than Iraq over the past four years. If true, many North and South American cities and Sub-Saharan Africa have had a similar murder rate to that claimed in Iraq. For those of us who have been in Iraq, the suggestion that New Orleans is more violent seems simply ridiculous.

Secondly, there have to be at least 120,000 and probably 140,000 deaths per year from natural causes in a country with the population of Iraq. The numerous stories we hear about overflowing morgues, the need for new cemeteries and new body collection brigades are not consistent with a 10 per cent rise in death rate above the baseline.

And finally, there was a study, peer-reviewed and published in The Lancet, Europe's most prestigious medical journal, which put the death toll at 650,000 as of last July. The study, which I co-authored, was done by the standard cluster approach used by the UN to estimate mortality in dozens of countries each year. While the findings are imprecise, the lower range of possibilities suggested that the Iraq government was at least downplaying the number of dead by a factor of 10.

There are several reasons why the governments involved in this conflict have been able to confuse the issue of Iraqi deaths. Our Lancet report involved sampling and statistical analysis, which is rather dry reading. Media reports always miss most deaths in times of war, so the estimate by the media-based monitoring system, Iraqbodycount.org (IBC) roughly corresponds with the Iraq government's figures. Repeated evaluations of deaths identified from sources independent of the press and the Ministry of Health show the IBC listing to be less than 10 per cent complete, but because it matches the reports of the governments involved, it is easily referenced.

Several other estimates have placed the death toll far higher than the Iraqi government estimates, but those have received less press attention. When in 2005, a UN survey

reported that 90 per cent of violent attacks in Scotland were not recorded by the police, no one, not even the police, disputed this finding. Representative surveys are the next best thing to a census for counting deaths, and nowhere but Iraq have partial tallies from morgues and hospitals been given such credence when representative survey results are available.

The Pentagon will not release information about deaths induced or amounts of weaponry used in Iraq. On 9 January of this year, the embedded Fox News reporter Brit Hume went along for an air attack, and we learned that at least 25 targets were bombed that day with almost no reports of the damage appearing in the press.

Saddam Hussein's surveillance network, which only captured one third of all deaths before the invasion, has certainly deteriorated even further. During last July, there were numerous televised clashes in Anbar, yet the system recorded exactly zero violent deaths from the province. The last Minister of Health to honestly assess the surveillance network, Dr Ala'din Alwan, admitted that it was not reporting from most of the country by August 2004. He was sacked months later after, among other things, reports appeared based on the limited government data suggesting that most violent deaths were associated with coalition forces.

The consequences of downplaying the number of deaths in Iraq are profound for both the UK and the US. How can the Americans have a surge of troops to secure the population and promise success when the coalition cannot measure the level of security to within a factor of 10? How can the US and Britain pretend they understand the level of resentment in Iraq if they are not sure if, on average, one in 80 families have lost a household member, or one in seven, as our study suggests?

If these two countries have triggered an episode more deadly than the Rwandan genocide, and have actively worked to mask this fact, how will they credibly be able to criticise Sudan or Zimbabwe or the next government that kills thousands of its own people?

For longer than the US has been a nation, Britain has pushed us at our worst of moments to do the right thing. That time has come again with regard to Iraq. It is wrong to be the junior partner in an endeavour rigged to deny the next death induced, and to have spokespeople effectively respond to that death with disinterest and denial.

Our nations' leaders are collectively expressing belligerence at a time when the populace knows they should be expressing contrition. If that cannot be corrected, Britain should end its role in this deteriorating misadventure. It is unlikely that any historians will record the occupation of Iraq in a favourable light. Britain followed the Americans into this débâcle. Wouldn't it be better to let history record that Britain led them out?

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