

# Is the United States Killing 10,000 Iraqis Every Month? Or Is It More?

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While the atlantist media is reporting more than 3 000 GI's killed in Iraq and many civilian victims of inter-confessional violences, it looks away from the daily slaughter of civilians by US patrols conducting their search operations for suspects. Professor Michael Schwartz estimates that their number reached 10 000 a month in the first 3 years of occupation. And much more since Bush ordered his surge of operations.

A state-of-the-art research study published in October 12, 2006 issue of The Lancet (the most prestigious British medical journal) [1] concluded that — as of a year ago — 600,000 Iraqis had died violently due to the war in Iraq. That is, the Iraqi death rate for the first 39 months of the war was just about 15,000 per month.

That wasn't the worst of it, because the death rate was increasing precipitously, and during the first half of 2006 the monthly rate was approximately 30,000 per month, a rate that no doubt has increased further during the ferocious fighting associated with the current American surge.

The U.S. and British governments quickly dismissed these results as “methodologically flawed,” even though the researchers used standard procedures for measuring mortality in war and disaster zones. (They visited a random set of homes and asked the residents if anyone in their household had died in the last few years, recording the details, and inspecting death certificates in the vast majority of cases.) The two belligerent governments offered no concrete reasons for rejecting the study's findings, and they ignored the fact that they had sponsored identical studies (conducted by some of the same researchers) in other disaster areas, including Darfur and Kosovo. The reasons for this rejection were, however, clear enough: the results were simply too devastating for the culpable governments to acknowledge. (Secretly the British government later admitted that it was “a tried and tested way to measuring mortality in conflict zones”; but it has never publicly admitted its validity).

Reputable researchers have accepted the Lancet study's results as valid with virtually no dissent. Juan Cole, the most visible American Middle East scholar, summarized it in a particularly vivid comment: “the US misadventure in Iraq is responsible [in a little over three years] for setting off the killing of twice as many civilians as Saddam managed to polish off in 25 years.”

Despite the scholarly consensus, the governments' denials have been quite effective from a public education point of view, and the few news items that mention the Lancet study bracket it with official rebuttals. One BBC report, for example, mentioned the figure in an article headlined “Huge Rise in Iraqi Death Tolls,” [2] and quoted at length from President

Bush's public rebuttal, in which he said that the methodology was "pretty well discredited," adding that "six-hundred thousand or whatever they guessed at is just ... it's not credible." As a consequence of this sort of coverage, most Americans probably believe that Bush's December 2005 figure of 30,000 Iraqi civilian deaths (less than 10% of the actual total) is the best estimate of Iraqi deaths up to that time.

Counting how many Iraqis the occupation has killed These shocking statistics are made all the more horrific when we realize that among the 600,000 or so victims of Iraqi war violence, the largest portion have been killed by the American military, not by carbombings or death squads, or violent criminals — or even all these groups combined.

The Lancet interviewers asked their Iraqi respondents how their loved ones died and who was responsible. The families were very good at the cause of death, telling the reporters that over half (56%) were due to gunshots, with an eighth due each to car bombs (13%), air strikes (13%) and other ordinance (14%). Only 4% were due to unknown causes.

The families were not as good at identifying who was responsible. Although they knew, for example, that air strike victims were killed by the occupation, and that carbomb victims were killed by insurgents, the gunshot and ordinance fatalities often occurred in firefights or in circumstances with no witnesses. Many times, therefore, they could not tell for sure who was responsible. Only were certain, and the interviewers did not record the responsible party if "households had any uncertainty" as to who fired the death shot.

The results are nevertheless staggering for those of us who read the American press: for the deaths that the victims families knew for sure who the perpetrator was, U.S. forces (or their "Coalition of the Willing" allies) were responsible for 56%. That is, we can be very confident that the Coalition had killed at least 180,000 Iraqis by the middle of 2006. Moreover, we have every reason to believe that the U.S. is responsible for its pro rata share (or more) of the unattributed deaths. That means that the U.S. and its allies may well have killed upwards of 330,000 Iraqis by the middle of 2006.

The remainder can be attributed to the insurgents, criminals, and to Iraqi forces. And let's be very clear here: car bombs, the one source that was most easy for victims' families to identify, was responsible for 13% of the deaths, about 80,000 people, or about 2,000 per month. This is horrendous, but it is far less than half of the confirmed American total, and less than a quarter of the probable American total.

Even if we work with the lower, confirmed, figured of 180,000 Iraqi deaths caused by the occupation firepower, which yields an average of just over 5,000 Iraqis killed every month by U.S. forces and our allies since the beginning of the war. And we have to remember that the rate of fatalities was twice as high in 2006 as the overall average, meaning that the American average in 2006 was well over 10,000 per month, or something over 300 Iraqis every day, including Sundays. With the surge that began in 2007, the current figure is likely even higher.

Why don't we know about this? These figures sound impossible to most Americans. Certainly 300 Iraqis killed by Americans each day would be headline news, over and over again. And yet, the electronic and print media simply do not tell us that the U.S. is killing all these people. We hear plenty about car bombers and death squads, but little about Americans killing Iraqis, except the occasional terrorist, and the even more occasional atrocity story.

How, then, is the US accomplishing this carnage, and why is it not newsworthy? The answer lies in another amazing statistic: this one released by the U.S. military and reported by the highly respectable Brookings Institution [3]: for the past four years, the American military sends out something over 1,000 patrols each day into hostile neighborhoods, looking to capture or kill insurgents and terrorists. (Since February, the number has increased to nearly 5,000 patrols a day, if we include the Iraqi troops participating in the American surge.)

These thousands of patrols regularly turn into thousands of Iraqi deaths because these patrols are not the “walk in the sun” that they appear to be in our mind’s eye. Actually, as independent journalist Nir Rosen described vividly and agonizingly in his indispensable book, *In the Belly of the Green Bird* [4], they involve a kind of energetic brutality that is only occasionally reported by an embedded American mainstream journalist.

This brutality is all very logical, once we understand the purpose and process of these patrols. American soldiers and marines are sent into hostile communities where virtually the entire population is supports the insurgency. They often have a list of suspects’ addresses; and their job is to interrogate or arrest or kill the suspect; and search the house for incriminating evidence, particularly arms and ammunition, but also literature, video equipment, and other items that the insurgency depends upon for its political and military activities. When they don’t have lists of suspects, they conduct “house-to-house” searches, looking for suspicious behavior, individuals or evidence.

In this context, any fighting age man is not just a suspect, but a potentially lethal adversary. Our soldiers are told not to take any chances: in many instances, for example, knocking on doors could invite gunshots through the doors. Their instructions are therefore to use the element of surprise whenever the situation appears to be dangerous — to break down doors, shoot at anything suspicious, and throw grenades into rooms or homes where there is any chance of resistance. If they encounter tangible resistance, they can call in artillery and/or air power rather than try to invade a building.

Here is how two Iraqi civilians described these patrols to Asia Times reporter Pepe Escobar:

“Hussein and Hasan confirm that the Americans usually ‘come at night, sometimes by day, always protected by helicopters.’ They “sometimes bomb houses, sometimes arrest people, sometimes throw missiles” [5]

If they encounter no resistance, these patrols can track down 30 or so suspects, or inspect several dozen homes, in a days work. That is, our 1,000 or so patrols can invade 30,000 homes in a single day. But if an IED explodes under their Humvee or a sniper shoots at them from nearby, then their job is transformed into finding, capturing, or killing the perpetrator of the attack. Iraqi insurgents often set off IEDs and invite these firefights, in order to stall the patrols prevent the soldiers from forcibly entering 30 or so homes, violently accosting their residents, and perhaps beating, arresting, or simply humiliating the residents.

The battles triggered by IEDs and sniper attacks almost always involve the buildings surrounding the incident, since that is where the insurgents take cover to avoid the American counter-attack. Americans, therefore, regular shoot into these buildings where the perpetrators are suspected of hiding, with all the attendant dangers of killing other people. The rules of engagement for American soldiers include efforts to avoid killing civilians, and there are many accounts of restraint because civilians are visibly in the line of fire. But if they are in hot pursuit of a perpetrator, their rules of engagement make it clear that

capturing or killing the insurgent takes precedent over civilian safety.

This sounds pretty tame, and not capable of generating the statistics that the Lancet study documented. But the sheer quantity of American patrols — 1,000 each day — and the sheer quantity of the confrontations inside people's homes, the responses to sniper and IED attacks, and the ensuing firefights add up to mass slaughter.

The cumulative brutality of these thousands of patrols can be culled from the recent inquest into the suspected war crimes committed in the city of Haditha back in November 19, 2005. The investigation seeks to ascertain whether American marines deliberately murdered 24 civilians including executing with point blank head shots nineteen unarmed women, children and older men in a single room, apparently in retribution for the death of one of their comrades earlier in the day. These horrific charges have made the incident newsworthy and propelled the investigation.

But it is the defense's version of the story that makes the Haditha useful in understanding the translation of American patrols into hundreds of thousands of Iraqi deaths. First Lt. William T. Kallop, the highest ranking officer in Haditha that day, told the military hearing that he had ordered a patrol "to 'clear' an Iraqi home in Haditha after a roadside bomb had killed a Marine" earlier in the day. Later, after the firefight that this action generated, he went to inspect the home and was shocked to discover that only civilians had been killed:

"He inspected one of the homes with a Marine corporal, Hector Salinas, and found women, children and older men who had been killed when marines threw a grenade into the room. "What the hell happened, why aren't there any insurgents here?" Lieutenant Kallop testified that he asked aloud. 'I looked at Corporal Salinas, and he looked just as shocked as I did.'

It is important to keep in mind that Lt. Kallop would not have been shocked if there had been one or more insurgents among the dead. What made the situation problematic was that all the fatalities were clearly civilians, and it led to the possibility that they had not been in hot pursuit of an enemy combatant.

Later, however, Lt. Kallop decided that even this situation involved no misbehavior on the part of his troops, after questioning Staff Sgt. Frank D. Wuterich, who had led the patrol and commanded the military action:

"Sergeant Wuterich had told him that they had killed people [in that house] after approaching a door to it and hearing the distinct metallic sound of an AK-47 being prepared to fire. "I thought that was within the rules of engagement because the squad leader thought that he was about to kick in the door and walk into a machine gun,' Lieutenant Kallop said." According to Kallop, the soldiers were thus following the rules of engagement because if the squad leader "thought" that he was going to be attacked (based on recognizing a noise through a closed door), he was authorized and justified to use the full lethal force of the patrol (in this case a hand grenade), enough to kill all the people huddled within the apartment.

The critical distinction has to do with intentionality. First Lieutenant Max D. Frank, sent to investigate the incident somewhat later, explained this logic: "It was unfortunate what happened, sir," Lieutenant Frank told the Marine prosecutor, Lt. Col. Sean Sullivan, "but I didn't have any reason to believe that what they had done was on purpose."

Translated, this means that as long as the soldiers sincerely believed that their attack might capture or kill an armed insurgent who could attack them, the rules of engagement justified their action and they were therefore not culpable of any crime.

Note here that other alternatives were not considered. The soldiers could have decided that there was a good chance of hurting civilians in this situation, and therefore retreated without pursuing the suspected insurgent. This would have allowed him to get away, but it would have protected the residents of the house. This option was not considered, even though many of us might feel that letting one or two or three insurgents escape (in a town filled with insurgents) might be acceptable instead of risking (and ultimately ending) the lives of 19 civilians.

Later in the hearing, Major General Richard Huck, the commanding officer in charge of the Marines in Haditha, underscored these rules of engagement in more general terms, — and also ignored the unthinkable option of letting the insurgents get away — when he explained why he had not ordered an investigation of the deaths:

“They had occurred during a combat operation and it was not uncommon for civilians to die in such circumstances. ‘In my mind’s eye, I saw insurgent fire, I saw Kilo Company fire,’ Huck testified, via video link from the Pentagon, where he is assistant deputy commandant for plans, policies and operations. ‘I could see how 15 neutrals in those circumstances could be killed.’”

For General Huck, and for other commanders in Iraq, once “insurgent fire” — or even the threat of insurgent fire — entered the picture (and it certainly had earlier, when the American soldier was killed), then the actions reported by the Marines in that Haditha home were not just legitimate (if they reported them honestly), but exemplary. They were responding appropriately in a battlefield situation, and the death of “15 neutrals” is “not uncommon” in those circumstances.

Let’s keep in mind, then, that the United States undertakes something over 1,000 patrols each day, and lately this number has surged to over 5,000 (if we also count patrols by the Iraqi military). According to U.S. military statistics, again reported by the Brookings Institute, these patrols currently result in just under 3,000 firefights every month, or just under an average of 100 per day (not counting the additional 25 or so involving our Iraqi allies). Most of them do not produce 24 Iraqi deaths, but the rules of engagement our soldiers are given — throwing hand grenades into buildings holding suspected insurgents, using maximum firepower against snipers, and calling in artillery and air power against stubborn resistance — guarantee a regular drumbeat of mortality.

It is worth recording how these events are reported in the American press, when they are noted at all. Here, for example, is an Associated Press account of American/British patrols in Meyssan province, a stronghold of the Mahdi army:

Well to the south, Iraqi officials reported as many as 36 people were killed in fierce overnight fighting that began as British and Iraqi forces conducted house-to-house searches in Amarah, a stronghold of the Shiite Mahdi Army militia [6].

This brief description was part of a five paragraph account of fighting all over Iraq, part of a review under the headline “U.S. and Iraqi forces Move on Insurgents.” It contained brief accounts of several different operations, none of them presented as major events. There

were 100 or so engagements that day, and many of them produced deaths. How many? Based on the Lancet article, we could guess that on that day — and most days — the incident in Amarah represented perhaps one-tenth of all the Iraqis killed by Americans that day. Over the course of June, the accumulated total probably came to something over 10,000.

During the hearing about Haditha one of the investigators addressed the larger question that emerges from the sacrifice of so many civilians to the cause of chasing and catching insurgents in Iraq. Lieutenant Max D. Frank, the first officer to investigate the deaths, characterized is an “unfortunate and unintended result of local residents’ allowing insurgent fighters to use family homes to shoot at passing American patrols.” Using a similar logic, First Lt. Adam P. Mathes, the executive office of the company involved, argued against issuing an apology to local residents for the incident. Mathes advocated that instead they should issue a warning to Haditha residents, that the incident was “an unfortunate thing that happens when you let terrorists use your house to attack our troops.”

The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines terror as “violent or destructive acts (as bombing) committed by groups in order to intimidate a population. ...” The incident at Haditha was just such a violent act, and was one of about 100 that day that Lt. Mathes hoped would intimidate the population of Haditha and other towns in Iraq from continuing to support insurgents.

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