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MIT CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

Audit

of the Conventional Wisdom

The Audit of Conventional Wisdom

In this series of essays, MIT's Center for International Studies tours the horizon of conventional wisdoms that animate U.S. foreign policy, and put them to the test of data and history. By subjecting particularly well-accepted ideas to close scrutiny, our aim is to re-engage policy and opinion leaders on topics that are too easily passing such scrutiny. We hope that this will lead to further debate and inquiries, with a result we can all agree on: better foreign policies that lead to a more peaceful and prosperous world. Authors in this series are available to the press and policy community. Contact: Amy Tarr (atarr@mit.edu, 617.253.1965).

The Iraq War: Do Civilian Casualties Matter?

Les Roberts

A disturbing thing happened to me in Afghanistan last May while working on a project to install wells in villages. After a delightful month of working in a rural province, filled with welcoming leaders and offers of tea at every house, the mood suddenly changed. A young man walked up to my 42-year-old female American colleague and bashed her in the face. As we collected our interviewers and headed back to the vehicles, children from the village pelted us with stones. This violence against anything foreign played out in hundreds of locations across Afghanistan that day.

The sudden burst of hatred for all things seen as related to the occupying Americans was primarily the combination of two things: plans for the Afghan Government to grant the United States a long-term lease on an airbase, and the simultaneous accusation in *Newsweek* magazine the day before that in Guantanamo Bay, U.S. military personnel had defiled the Koran.

A more disturbing thing happened that same month. Accusations by Amnesty International that a pattern of abuse has been documented in Guantanamo Bay were brusquely dismissed by President Bush. This was the most recent highlight in what I believe to be the greatest threat to U.S. national security: the image that the United States is a violator of international laws and order and that there is no means other than violence to curb it.

This impression that the United States is beyond the law arises from several factors: indifference or hostility to international environmental treaties and the International Criminal Court; invading Iraq under unsupportable, and probably illegal, pretenses; and repeated opinions expressed by high officials in Washington that the Geneva Conventions should not constrain our activities in Iraq or in our prisons. This last point seems particularly problematic, since the 1949 articles of the Geneva Conventions were ratified by the United States more than 50 years ago.¹ These laws imply that abusing prisoners to gain information

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A Bit of the Conventional Wisdom

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is illegal—as has happened in Guantanamo Bay and elsewhere—a topic getting widespread and deserved publicity.² But another troubling aspect of war policy not receiving attention commensurate with its significance is the large number of civilian casualties in Iraq.

The Scale of Civilian Casualties

The deaths of civilians in Iraq may indeed add up to violations of the Geneva Conventions, especially Article IV.³ This became apparent to me last year, when I headed a multinational team of medical and public health researchers to investigate the scale of fatalities associated with the U.S. invasion of Iraq and subsequent violence.

The resulting report, published in the British medical journal, *The Lancet*, estimated around 100,000 and possibly far more civilians have died because of the invasion.⁴ Our study was based on 988 household interviews in 33 randomly picked neighborhoods from across the entire country, and covered the period between on the beginning of the war (March 2003) and September 2004.

Most disturbing and certain about the results is that more than 80 percent of violent deaths were caused by U.S. forces and that most of the people they killed were women and children. None of the deaths we recorded involved intentional wrongdoing on the part of individual soldiers, instead being mostly from artillery and aerial weaponry. When I presented these results to about thirty Pentagon employees last fall, one came up to me afterwards and said, “We have dropped about 50,000 bombs, mostly on insurgents hiding behind civilians. What the [expletive] did you think was going to happen?” Our survey team’s 100,000-death estimate for the first 18 months after the U.S.-led invasion equates to about 101 coalition-attributed violent deaths per day.⁵

The study received front-page coverage in most European and Middle Eastern newspapers, but was barely covered in the United States.⁶ Our findings were not unique, however. A report in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in July 2004, based on interviews with returning U.S. soldiers, suggests an unintentional non-combatant death toll of 133 deaths per day.⁷ A survey led by a group in Norway (see report at www.fao.no) estimated 56 violent deaths per day over the first year of occupation, but the authors speculate that the estimate is low.⁸ A widely cited survey by the People’s Kifah (an Iraqi political group) estimated 152 violent deaths per day over the first seven months of occupation, but proper documentation of the supposed door-to-door record has not been obtained.⁹ The NGO Coordinating Committee for Iraq recorded approximately 50 violent deaths per day during 2004.¹⁰ All five of these sources suggest that many tens of thousands of Iraqis have died, and all but the FAFO survey (which did not identify perpetrators) agree that coalition forces are responsible for the lion’s share of these deaths. The death toll most commonly cited in the news media is the Iraqbodycount.org estimate of 17 violent deaths per day. That estimate is largely based on news media accounts and is described by the organization itself as a lowest possible body count.

To demonstrate another source of accounting for fatalities commonly cited in the Middle Eastern press, Figure 1 represents the record of deaths made at the largest morgue in Baghdad for all of 2003 through September 2004. Before the war, about 10 percent of all Baghdad deaths were recorded in this morgue. (Data for December 2003 are missing.) While the use of morgues

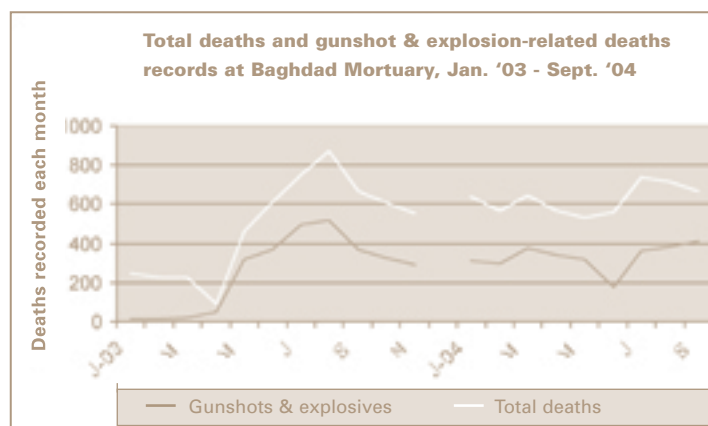


Figure 1.

and the populations they serve can change over time and does not provide a true rate of death, the 2.7-fold increase of recorded deaths in the 18 months after the invasion is both dramatic and is almost all explained by the increase in gunshot and explosion-related wounds. The contrast between the graph showing 400 violent deaths a month in portions of Baghdad served by this morgue, and an oft-cited Iraqbodycount estimate of about 500 violent deaths per month in the entire country, could not be more dramatic. The Iraqbodycount estimate is certainly low and the morgue-recorded deaths are probably overestimating the increase in mortality. (The dramatic increase in deadly violence is likely resulting in a larger fraction of decedents bypassing hospitals and having their deaths recorded at morgues.)

It is probable that the level of violence and increase in mortality is overestimated by Figure 1 and by those in the foreign press who cite such numbers. It is more probable, however, that the estimates of 20,000 to 30,000 civilian deaths cited in the American press are too low, most likely by a factor of five or ten.

Why is it Important to know?

The casualty count is significant for many reasons. There are, of course, moral considerations. Is the way we wage war now indiscriminate with regard to non-combatants? Is the rhetoric about “precision” in our airborne weaponry masking a darker reality of unnecessary carnage on the ground? Avoidable killing of non-combatants is prohibited by the Geneva Conventions, regardless of the actions of the insurgency. And the possibility that the Coalition forces could be responsible for as many as 200,000 Iraqi civilian deaths or more would likely alter the political mood in the United States with respect to the legitimacy of “Operation Iraqi Freedom.”

A number of opinion polls of Iraqis reveal strong disquiet about the continuing occupation by the coalition forces. “The first survey of Iraqis sponsored by the U.S. Coalition Provisional Authority after the Abu Ghraib prison scandal shows that most say they would feel safer if Coalition forces left immediately,” said a *Newsweek* report in June 2004.¹¹ It is difficult to square these views with the expectation that the collapse of the Hussein regime and the need for coalition forces to put down the insurgency would make the presence of U.S. forces more popular. One plausible explanation is that ordinary Iraqis see the violence as coming from both the insurgency and the U.S. military.

The difficulty of pacifying the country, therefore, may be directly related to the way the U.S. military is waging war. The desire to protect American troops from harm, and to minimize U.S. casualties (which are, of course, assiduously recorded and publicized), are understandable—indeed, are politically necessary. But the price for reducing American vulnerability is in part a use of force in Iraq that apparently is producing high numbers of civilian deaths and a resulting backlash that is not abating.

The short-term costs of this war-making strategy are increasingly apparent. The longer-range consequences could be even more pernicious in Iraq, as violence undermines hopes for constitutional governance, drives both alienation from the West and support or tolerance for political extremists, and prolongs economic hardship.

These adverse consequences, some of which are already visible, could be attributable to many factors, but the extraordinary level

of violence and death is surely primary. Yet, apart from the well-publicized insurgency or “terrorists,”—themselves the product, in part, of the U.S. occupation¹²—the sources of that deadly force are virtually invisible to Americans, whose political choices are thereby blinded.

Courses of Action

We in the United States have a perception problem. We are perceived abroad as an intermittently rogue state too powerful for anyone to control. Hundreds of millions see us as a state that abuses prisoners and indiscriminately allows Iraqi civilians to die to avoid putting their own occupying troops at risk. The Bush administration and many Americans perceive us to be servants of noble motives dragged into messy situations that cannot help but to leave us looking dirty on occasion. The threat of a growing international loathing of America does not depend on which of these perceptions is correct, it depends on the ability of these two perceptions to be held so far apart. The contrast between foreign press coverage and American news media coverage of civilian deaths in Iraq only amplifies such international tensions.

One solution to this is an independent inquiry into the issue of prisoner abuse in Guantanamo, Iraq, and Afghanistan, and a separate inquiry into the legality of the initiation and execution of the war in Iraq, particularly with regard to civilian casualties. This does not mean surrendering powers to the UN or joining the International Criminal Court. The 9/11 Commission showed us that our society and our government are robust and flexible enough to develop truth and reconciliation mechanisms without threatening any of the institutions we cherish. If we do not respond to credible accusations of international wrongdoing with transparent and deliberative consideration, millions of angry people who feel threatened by us will respond for themselves.

article footnotes

1 The Fourth Geneva Convention, Convention (IV) Relative To The Protection Of Civilian Persons In Time Of War U.N.T.S. No. 973, vol. 75. [http://www.icrc.org/web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/party_main_treaties/\\$File/IHL_and_other_related_Treaties.pdf](http://www.icrc.org/web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/party_main_treaties/$File/IHL_and_other_related_Treaties.pdf), accessed 7/6/05. Also, *Final Record of the Diplomatic Conference of Geneva of 1949*, Vol. 1, Federal Political Department, Berne, p. 346.

2 Anthony Lewis, “Guantanamo’s Long Shadow,” *New York Times* (June 21, 2005): 21. See also Amnesty International Report 2005. Amnesty International, London. <http://web.amnesty.org/report2005/intro-index-eng>, accessed July 7, 2005.

3 Convention (IV) relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War. Geneva, 12 August 1949. Full text at <http://www.icrc.org/ihl.nsf/7c4d08d9b287a42141256739003e636b/6756482d86146898c125641e004aa3c5?OpenDocument>, accessed July 6, 2005.

4 L. Roberts, R. Lafta, R. Garfield, J. Khudhairi, and G. Burnham, “Mortality before and after the 2003 invasion of Iraq: cluster sample survey,” *The Lancet*, 364 (9448): 1857–1864. There was widespread misunderstanding in the news media about the methods we used to arrive at the range of estimates published in *The Lancet*. For more information on methods, see <http://www.smartindicators.org/cmr-ref.php>, and <http://www.childinfo.org/mics/mics3/manual.php>.

5 This estimate excluded Falluja, because it was so violent it could skew the results, but included “Kurdistan,” which was quite peaceful. Thus the results probably underestimated deaths from the war during that period.

6 The exceptions in the U.S. were *The Economist* (“Estimating the Iraq war’s death toll,” Nov. 4, 2004), which includes a good explanation of the methods used to arrive at our estimates, and Lila Guterman, “Lost Count,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (February 4, 2004), which detailed the lack or oddities of coverage itself.

7 Hoge CW, Castro CA, Messer SC, et al. “Combat duty in Iraq and Afghanistan, mental health problems, and barriers to care.” *New England Journal of Medicine*. 351 (July 1, 2004):13–21.

8 Living Conditions in Iraq Survey, 2004 <http://www.iq.undp.org/ILCS/population.htm>, accessed 7/7/05.) Lead Researcher Jon Pederson told *Lancet* author Richard Garfield that he knows his estimate is low. When revisiting a small sub-sample of household with children, and additional 50% of reported child deaths could be identified.

9 “Counting the civilian cost in Iraq” BBC News, June 6, 2005, on-line at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3672298.stm.

10 Norman Stewart, NCCI, personal communication 11/10/04.

11 Michael Hirsh, “Grim Numbers,” *Newsweek* (June 15, 2004), reported also on-line at <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/5217874/site/newsweek/>.

12 Dana Priest, “Iraq New Terror Breeding Ground; War Created Haven, CIA Advisers Report,” *Washington Post* (January 14, 2005): 1.

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