

# CRS Report for Congress

Received through the CRS Web

## Iraqi Civilian Deaths Estimates

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### Summary

This report presents various governmental and nongovernmental estimates of Iraqi civilian fatalities. The Department of Defense (DOD) regularly updates total U.S. military death and wounded statistics from Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), as reflected in CRS Report RS21578, *Iraq: Summary of U.S. Casualties*. However, no Iraqi or U.S. government office regularly releases statistics on Iraqi civilian deaths. Statistics on these topics are sometimes available through alternative sources, such as nonprofit organizations, or through statements made by officials to the press. No authoritative source has released either an estimate of Iraqi civilians who have been wounded or an estimate of total Iraqi casualties (dead and wounded). Because these estimates are based on varying time periods and have been created using differing methodologies, readers should exercise caution when using these statistics and should look on them as guideposts rather than as statements of historical fact. See also CRS Report RS22532, *Iraqi Police and Security Forces Casualty Estimates*. This report will be updated as needed.

The United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) and the United States Department of Defense (DOD) have recently released reports that include sections on Iraqi civilian casualties. In the latest *Human Rights Report*, the UNAMI estimated that 3,709 Iraqi civilians were killed in October 2006 (the highest number of any month so far in the conflict) and 3,345 Iraqi

Iraqi Civilian Death Estimates	
Iraq Body Count	47,016 –
March 19, 2003 – November 14, 2006	52,142
Iraq Casualty Count	
March 1, 2005 – November 14, 2006	19,480
Iraq Health Minister Ali al-Shemari	
March 19, 2003 – November 10, 2006	150,000
Brookings Institution's Iraq Index	
Cumulative Estimate	
May 2003 – August 31, 2006	62,000
The Lancet, "Mortality after the 2003	
Invasion of Iraq"	426,369 –
March 19, 2003 – July 31, 2006	793,663
United Nations Assistance Mission	
for Iraq (UNAMI)	
January 1, 2006 – October 31, 2006	27,881

civilians were killed in September 2006.<sup>1</sup> These figures represent a tally of two civilian death counts: one from the Iraq Ministry of Health, which records deaths reported by hospitals; and one from the Medico-Legal Institute (MLI) in Baghdad, which reports the number of unidentified bodies it receives.<sup>2</sup> The June 30, 2006 version of the UNAMI report estimated that the combined count of civilian casualties from January 2006 to June 2006 was 14,228 and commented that:

On 25 June, the [Iraqi] Ministry of Health publicly acknowledged information stating that since 2003 at least 50,000 persons have been killed violently. The Baghdad morgue reportedly received 30,204 bodies from 2003 to mid-2006. Deaths numbering 18,933 occurred from “military clashes” and “terrorist attacks” between 5 April 2004 and 1 June 2006. The Ministry further indicated that the number of deaths is probably underreported.<sup>3</sup>

UNAMI has also made estimates of civilian casualties in Baghdad, a topic that has drawn nearly as much attention as estimates of civilian casualties in the country as a whole. In a recent article in the *Washington Post*, Gianni Magazzeni, chief of UNAMI’s Human Rights Office, asserted that there had been 1,536 violent deaths in Baghdad in August 2006, as reported by the Baghdad morgue.<sup>4</sup> The UNAMI July 1 - August 31 human rights report indicated that “In Baghdad the total [number] of persons killed in July and August was 5,106 ... In August there was a decline in the overall number of killed and wounded probably due to a reduction in the number of casualties in Baghdad. Such reduction was somehow offset by increases in other Governorates, most notably Diyala and Mosul.”<sup>5</sup>

DOD has not released a composite estimate of Iraqi civilian deaths during Operation Iraqi Freedom. However, it has released a bar chart of the average daily Iraqi casualties and average daily coalition casualties. The chart does not distinguish between deaths and wounded, nor does it distinguish between civilians and security forces (or ISF).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander G. Higgins, “U.N. says 3,709 Iraqi Civilians Killed in October, a New Monthly High,” *Associated Press*, November 22, 2006. This bimonthly report has yet to be posted online; earlier Human Rights reports can be found at the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq website, at [<http://tinyurl.com/ycg9rf>]. All UN figures exclude casualty estimates from the Region of Kurdistan.

<sup>2</sup> Nick Wadhams, “Iraq civilian toll spikes to nearly 6,000,” *Associated Press*, July 19, 2006.

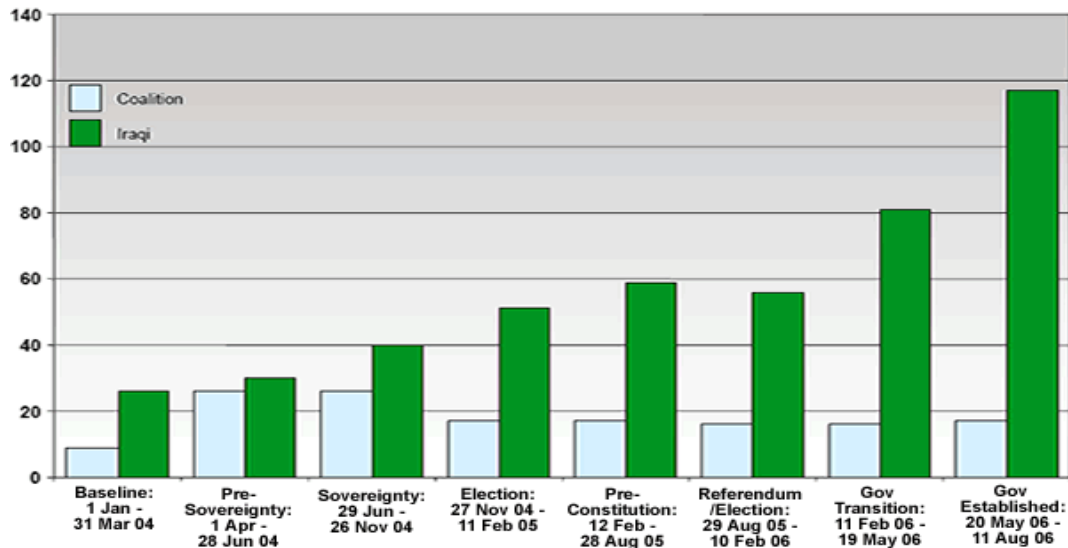
<sup>3</sup> United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq, *Human Rights Report: 1 May - 30 June 2006*, at [<http://tinyurl.com/ml6c8>].

<sup>4</sup> Ellen Knickmeyer, “Body Count in Baghdad Nearly Triples,” *Washington Post*, Sept. 8, 2006, p. A12.

<sup>5</sup> United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq, *Human Rights Report: 1 July - 31 August 2006*, at [<http://tinyurl.com/ycg9rf>], p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, Multi-National Corps-Iraq, *Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq: August 2006 Report to Congress in Accordance with the Department of Defense Appropriations Act 2006 (Section 9010)*, August 2006, at [<http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/pdfs/Security-Stabilty-ReportAug29r1.pdf>].

## Average Daily Casualties — Iraqi (incl. ISF) and Coalition April 1, 2004 — August 11, 2006



**Source:** DOD, Derived from Multi-National Corps - Iraq, [<http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/pdfs/Security-Stabilty-ReportAug29r1.pdf>]. Casualty data on this [chart] reflect updated data for each period and are derived from unverified initial reports submitted by Coalition elements responding to an incident; the inconclusivity of these numbers constrains them to be used for comparative purposes only.

Other Iraqi or U.S. government officials have also made estimates of Iraqi civilian casualties, often in conversations with the media. In a question and answer period after a speech in December 2005, President George W. Bush gave an estimate of civilian deaths, stating “30,000 [Iraqi civilians], more or less, have died as a result of the initial incursion and the ongoing violence against Iraqis [during Operation Iraqi Freedom].”<sup>7</sup> After the speech, however, aides said that Bush’s statement was not an official government estimate but a reflection of figures in news media reports.<sup>8</sup>

In the midst of the rising civilian death toll, the head of the Multi-National Corps-Iraq, Lt. Gen. Peter Chiarelli, said in an interview with Knight Ridder that “escalation of force” incidents have gone down in a comparison between July of last year to July of this year. “Escalation of force” incidents typically involve a U.S. soldier giving a verbal warning or hand signal to a driver approaching a checkpoint or convoy. The situation escalates if the driver fails to stop, with the soldier firing a warning shot and then shooting to kill.<sup>9</sup> The same article reported that an anonymous military official said that there had been 3,000 “escalation of force” incidents from July 2005 to December 31, 2005, and that

<sup>7</sup> White House News release, “President Discusses War on Terror and Upcoming Iraqi Elections,” Dec. 12, 2005, at [<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/12/20051212-4.html>].

<sup>8</sup> Adam Harvey, “Bush says civilian toll in Iraq 30,000,” *The Advertiser*, Dec. 14, 2005, p. 42.

<sup>9</sup> Nancy A. Youssef, “U.S. strives to curb Iraqi deaths; Stung by an increasingly hostile populace, the U.S. military has launched a major campaign to lessen the number of civilian deaths in Iraq,” *Buffalo News (New York)*, June 22, 2006, p. A1.

16% of the incidents led to a civilian being killed or injured. However, according to this source, from January 1, 2006, to May 31, 2006, 1,700 such incidents were reported and 12% led to a civilian being killed or injured.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to U.S. and government sources, the media have often cited a number of not-for-profit or scholarly sources that attempt to track civilian deaths. The British medical journal, *The Lancet*, has published two articles by researchers looking into civilian casualties. The first, “Mortality Before and After the 2003 Invasion of Iraq: Cluster Sample Survey,” used a cluster sample survey of households in Iraq to develop an estimate of 8,000 to 194,000 civilian casualties due to violent deaths since the start of the war.<sup>11</sup> This report has come under some criticism for its methodology, with an argument that some of the casualties could have resulted from the long-term negative health effects of the Saddam Hussein era. In addition, British Foreign Minister Straw has written a formal Ministerial Response rejecting the findings of the *Lancet* report on the grounds that the data analyzed were inaccurate.<sup>12</sup>

The second article, “Mortality After the 2003 Invasion of Iraq: A Cross-Sectional Cluster Sample Survey,”<sup>13</sup> increased the number of clusters surveyed from 33 to 47 clusters and reported an estimate of between 426,369 and 793,663 Iraqi civilian deaths from violent causes since the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom. This article, too, has sparked some controversy. Robert Blendon, director of the Harvard Program on Public Opinion and Health and Social Policy, defended the study in an interview with the *New York Times*, saying that interviewing urban dwellers chosen at random was “the best of what you can expect in a war zone.”<sup>14</sup> However, Stephen Moore, a consultant for Gorton Moore International, objected more strongly to the methods used by the researchers, commenting in the *Wall Street Journal* that the *Lancet* article lacked some of the hallmarks of good research: a small margin of error, a record of the demographics of respondents (so that one can be sure one has captured a fair representation of an entire population), and a large number of cluster points.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to government and academic sources, a number of nonprofit groups have also released unofficial estimates of Iraqi civilian casualties. The Iraq Body Count (IBC) is one source often cited by the media; it bases its online casualty estimates on media reports of casualties, some of which may involve security forces as well as civilians. As of November 9, 2006, the IBC estimated that between 46,863 and 51,968 civilians had

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Les Roberts, Ridyah Lafta, Richard Garfield et al., “Mortality Before and After the 2003 Invasion of Iraq: Cluster Sample Survey,” *The Lancet*, Oct. 29, 2004, 364 (9448): 1857-64.

<sup>12</sup> Jack Straw, Written U.K. Ministerial Statement Responding to a Lancet Study on Iraqi Casualty Numbers, Nov. 16, 2004, at [<http://tinyurl.com/3hv8j>].

<sup>13</sup> Gilbert Burnham, Riyadh Lafta, Shannon Doocy et al., “Mortality After the 2003 Invasion of Iraq: A Cross-Sectional Cluster Sample Survey,” *The Lancet*, Oct. 21, 2006 368(9545):1421-1429.

<sup>14</sup> Sabrina Tavernise and Donald G. McNeil, Jr., “Iraqi Dead May Total 600,000, Study Says.” *New York Times*, Oct 11, 2006, p. A16.

<sup>15</sup> Steven E. Moore, “655,000 War Dead?” *Wall Street Journal*, Oct 18, 2006, p. A.20.

died as a result of military action.<sup>16</sup> The IBC documents each of the casualties it records with a media source and, because it provides a minimum and a maximum estimate, its numbers are regarded by some as fairly authoritative.

The Brookings Institution has used modified numbers from the UN human rights report and Iraq Body count to develop its own estimate for Iraqi civilians who have died by violence. It estimates that 90 percent of the deaths reported in the UN human rights report happened as a result of violence, and they use this number as an estimate of January 2006 to July 2006 Iraqi civilian deaths due to violence. To expand their dates to include May 2003 to December 2005, they include 1.75 times the Iraq Body Count total (they do not specify the minimum or maximum total) to reflect “the fact that estimates for civilian casualties from the Iraqi Ministry of the Interior were 75 percent higher than those of our Iraq Body Count-based estimate over the aggregate December 2003 - May 2005 period.”<sup>17</sup> By using this method, the Brookings Institution estimates that between May 2003 and August 31, 2006, 63,000 Iraqi civilians have died due to violence.

Finally, the Iraq Coalition Casualty Count (ICCC) has been tracking U.S. and coalition casualties since the beginning of the war and has recently begun tracking civilian casualties as well using an IBC-like method of posting media reports of deaths. ICCC, like IBC, is prone to the kind of errors likely when using media reports for data: some deaths may not be reported in the media, while other deaths may be reported more than once. Nonetheless, both sources may be useful for different kinds of inquiries. The ICCC separates police and soldier deaths from civilian deaths and thus may be useful in tracking the two populations separately. The ICCC estimates that there were 19,179 civilian deaths from April 28, 2005 (Shiite-led government announced) through November 9, 2006, and 5,719 police and security force deaths from June 2003 through November 9, 2006.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Iraq Body Count at [<http://www.iraqbodycount.net>]. IBC is a nongovernmental organization managed by researchers and volunteers.

<sup>17</sup> Brookings Institution, *Iraq Index: Tracking Reconstruction and Security in Post-Saddam Iraq*, Sept. 7, 2006, at [<http://www.brookings.edu/fp/saban/iraq/index.pdf>], p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> Iraq Coalition Casualty Count, at [<http://icasualties.org/oif/IraqiDeaths.aspx>]. ICCC is a nongovernmental organization managed by researchers and volunteers.