

The Wages of War: Iraqi Fatalities in the 2003 Conflict

by Carl Conetta

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An elementary part of the costs of war includes accounting for war fatalities. Among other things, this is relevant to gauging the repercussions of a war, both locally and worldwide. With regard to the 2003 Iraq conflict:

Between March 19 and May 1, Operation Iraqi Freedom cost the lives of approximately 201 coalition troops; 148 of these were Americans.

On the Iraqi side: a review and analysis of the available evidence shows that approximately 11,000 to 15,000 Iraqis, combatants and noncombatants, were killed in the course of major combat actions through April 20. Of the total number of Iraqi fatalities during the relevant period, approximately 30 percent (or between 3,200 and 4,300) were noncombatant civilians who did not take up arms.

These conclusions are based on an extensive review and analysis of operational and demographic data, several hospital and burial society surveys, media interviews with Iraqi military personnel, battlefield fatality estimates made by US field commanders and embedded reporters, and media and non-governmental accounts of hundreds of civilian casualty incidents. Expressed in terms of their mid-points, our estimates of Iraqi deaths follow.

1991 v. 2003

Complicating any comparison of Operations Iraqi Freedom and Desert Storm are the disagreements surrounding the estimation of Iraqi casualties in the 1991 Gulf War. We estimate that Iraqi fatalities in the 1991 war include more than 3,500 civilians and between 20,000 and 26,000 military personnel.

Both the absolute number and the proportion of noncombatants among the Iraqi war dead were higher in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) than in Operation Desert Storm (ODS), twelve years earlier. This, despite the intervening technological enhancements to US warfighting capabilities (which cost US taxpayers some \$1 trillion) and despite the use of fewer aerial munitions in 2003 of which a higher proportion was guided.

In absolute terms, US, British, and Iraqi combatant fatalities were substantially fewer in the 2003 war than in the first Gulf War. Iraqi fatalities in 2003 were perhaps only 37 percent as numerous; US and British fatalities, 48 percent as numerous. Yet, measured against the numbers of troops engaged on both sides during the two wars, casualty rates were actually higher in 2003 for all concerned.

Looking at both the 1991 and 2003 wars, the only feature that marks the two wars as clearly "revolutionary" is the low ratio of US and British fatalities to Iraqi ones. These ratios are in the range of one to 70 - 90. (By comparison, Israel was able to achieve exchange rates of no better than 1-to-4 in its wars with Arab states.) Apart from the relatively low number of Anglo-American fatalities, both of the wars had death tolls that registered within range of many strategically significant wars of the past 40 years. They do not stand out clearly as "low casualty" wars.

The casualties incurred during the 2003 war certainly do not compare with those experienced in some of the protracted conflicts of the past 25 years, such as the 10-year anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan or the eight-year Iran-Iraq war. However, Iraqi losses in 2003 were comparable to those experienced in some of the Arab-Israeli and India-Pakistan conflicts. Indeed, noncombatant fatalities during the month-long 2003 war actually outnumber those suffered during the three years of intensified conflict between Israelis and Palestinians - the Al-Aqsa Intifada - that began in September 2000. And total Iraqi fatalities in 2003 surpass those incurred during the past 15 years of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Significance of Iraqi Deaths

The strategic significance of the Iraqi death toll - its relevance to US policy - does not derive solely from its magnitude, nor can it be fully appreciated through simple linear comparisons. Instead, it should be assessed in light of what the United States hopes to achieve and what it hopes to avoid in Iraq, in the region, and worldwide. Relevant to this we might ask how the death toll affects postwar efforts to stabilize Iraq, to isolate and blunt the global terrorist threat, and to build regional and global cooperation in pursuing these and other important security goals, such as nonproliferation.

It is apparent that the blood cost of the war now weighs heavily on the relationship between the United States and other nations - especially those in the Muslim and Arab world. The extent of noncombatant casualties in particular has helped send international opinion regarding America's global role and policy to a 25-year nadir. This may impact negatively on the war against terrorism and on the effort to stem the growth of terrorist organizations and the spread of extremist ideologies. The war's death toll also has greatly exacerbated the postwar challenge inside Iraq. There, the repercussions of war fatalities are amplified and sustained by strong kinship, tribal, village, and ethnic ties, adding substantially to anti-American sentiments and constituencies.

This pertains not only to noncombatant fatalities, but also to the death toll among combatants, who are not generally viewed by Iraqis as having been stooges of the Hussein regime. Many Iraqi combatants were conscripts who fought out of fear or for purely patriotic reasons (however misguided they may seem from a US perspective). This constituency of aggrieved individuals supplements other groups who may oppose US policy based on nationalist sentiments, allegiance to the old regime, tribal affiliations, or fundamentalist orientation. In this context, it is especially unfortunate that a key anti-Hussein community - Iraqi Shiites - may have borne the brunt of US power. Shiites comprised a majority of Iraqi conscripts - at least, in the regular army. And the war's most intense and protracted fighting occurred in Shiite majority areas.

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