

Ignorance of Iraqi death toll no longer an option

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Not wanting to think about civilian deaths in Iraq has become almost universal. The average American believed approximately 9,900 Iraqis had died as a result of the war according to a February 2007 AP poll. Unfortunately, recent evidence suggests that things in Iraq may be one-hundred times worse than Americans realize.

News report tallies suggest some 75,000 Iraqis have died since the US-led invasion. A study of 13 war affected countries presented at a recent Harvard conference found over 80% of violent deaths in conflicts go unreported by the press and governments. City officials in the Iraqi city of Najaf were recently quoted on Middle East Online stating that 40,000 unidentified bodies have been buried in that city since the start of the conflict. When speaking to the Rotarians in a speech covered on C-SPAN on September 5th, H.E. Samir Sumaida'ie, the Iraqi Ambassador to the US, stated that there were 500,000 new widows in Iraq. The Baker-Hamilton Commission similarly found that the Pentagon under-counted violent incidents by a factor of 10. Finally, a week ago the respected British polling firm ORB released the results of a poll estimating that 22% of households had lost a member to violence during the occupation of Iraq, equating to 1.2 million deaths. This finding roughly verifies a less precisely worded BBC poll last February that reported 17% of Iraqis had a household member who was a victim of violence.

There are now two polls and three scientific surveys all suggesting the official figures and media-based estimates in Iraq have missed 70-95% of all deaths. The evidence suggests that the extent of under-reporting by the media is only increasing with time.

Being forthright about the human cost of the war, perhaps over a million deaths to date, is in our long-term interests. How can military and civilian leadership comment intelligently about security trends in Iraq, or if any security policies are working, if they are not detecting most of the 5000+ violent deaths that occur per week? Can American plans for the future of Iraq be respected within Iraq if they do not openly address the toll that they imply? Avoiding the issue of Iraqi deaths will likely come back to haunt us as young people in the Middle East grow up with ingrained hostility toward America.

In the Zimmerman Telegram, Barbara Tuchman describes the resentment in Japan over the 1913 California Alien Land Law designed to prevent Japanese immigrants from buying land. This resentment almost enabled Germany to persuade Japan to attack the US during WWI and probably helped set the stage for it happening a quarter century later. We cannot yet tell what consequences will arise from our invasion of Iraq. Ignoring the consequences of our actions, or striking a tone of belligerence rather than contrition, will not build long-term relationships we need in the Middle East. Established methods for estimating deaths exist,

even in times of war. Discussion of trends and policy effects based on meaningful and validated measures such as median income and death rates would make our leaders more accountable and leave us better informed. Deliberately ignoring the numbers of dead Iraqis is not an option worthy of the United States , or in our enlightened self-interest.

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