

Wikileaks Docs Underestimate Iraqi Dead

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The nearly 400,000 documents on the Iraq War released by [Wikileaks](#) last Friday has stirred an unusual flurry of attention to the persistent brutalizing of civilians during the war, a topic forsaken by the major news media when the conflict was raging. But the English-language newspapers provided with the documents in advance — the New York Times and the Guardian (London) — are again misunderstanding the scope of the war's mayhem.

The revelations about the U.S. military turning a blind eye to abuse of detainees and the rampaging of private security contractors, most of them American firms like Xe (aka Blackwater) are disturbing, to be sure, if not exactly surprising. The pattern of American commanders' misleading statements or outright dishonesty, which Wikileaks' release of documents from the Afghanistan war last summer already amply demonstrated, is now becoming a military tradition. But the headlines, for once, focused on the death tolls of civilians. This is refreshing, since the Times and other major news media in the U.S. have only grudgingly addressed Iraqi suffering, and even then in peculiarly misinformed ways.

For all their value, the newly leaked documents will, unfortunately, reinforce the lower estimates of Iraqi mortality. The reports raise the number of civilians killed by about 15,000 over the estimate of Iraq Body Count (IBC), a London-based NGO. IBC's count, however widely cited, is accumulated by scanning mainly English-language news media reports. It's a crude method, given that not all deaths are reported in the news media, the number of reporters and their interests change over time, and most of the press was stuck in Baghdad during the most severe violence in 2004-07. IBC itself acknowledges that they are probably low by a factor of two, meaning their count should be 200,000 and the new data would make that at least 215,000. Even then, IBC does not count "insurgents" or security forces, or non-violent deaths that are attributable to the war.

The news reports stirred by Wikileaks' documents accepted the low IBC count as the baseline and did not bother to suggest that other, more credible estimates have been much higher. The lead story in the [Times](#) said that the new count "suggest numbers that are roughly in line with those compiled by several sources, including Iraq Body Count." Those "several" other sources, likely the U.N. office in Baghdad and the Brookings Index compiled by Michael O'Hanlon (which the Times runs as a regular op-ed), use roughly the same method as IBC and the military, so it is hardly validating to find them in agreement. The Associated Press stories were also using the low numbers.

Counting casualties is a tricky business, especially in the midst of a nasty sectarian war that was essentially enabled by an occupying force. The methods used by IBC and the others are "passive" surveillance: they rely on reporting (from journalists, morgues, and now soldiers) that is not able to capture more than a fraction of all fatalities. For example, only those

killed who are not immediately known (and taken by family) go to a morgue. As noted, journalists were mainly in Baghdad, but most violence occurred elsewhere. And the information released by Wikileaks are from U.S. soldiers in their “after action” reports, meaning that they had to be involved in or near to the violence, and had to report it correctly (identifying the dead as civilians, not all insurgents, and they were wont to do), if indeed they did so at all. Other violence would go unreported.

The most important point here is that by using passive surveillance, one never knows what deaths are being missed. The Times admitted these shortcomings: “The reports were only as good as the soldiers calling them in.” But it still left the impression that the death toll likely stood at about 115,000 civilians.

There were other estimates, of course, which relied on a proven method in epidemiology, a population-based survey in which qualified researchers would visit randomly selected households and ask questions to gauge the level of killing. Several such surveys have been taken in Iraq. Two, in fact, used this method at almost exactly the same time — in mid-2006 — with one managed by researchers at the John Hopkins School of Public Health (and commissioned by a program I run at MIT), and the other by the Iraqi Ministry of Health. Both found much higher numbers, although the surveys’ data do not agree in some important respects. Still, the Hopkins survey found 650,000 “excess deaths” from the war, including violent and non-violent causes, with the MoH at 400,000. And both were done well before the violence and other impacts — a crippled health care system, poor hygiene, etc. — took many more lives. Both measured all Iraqi deaths, not just civilians, especially important in a conflict where the line between civilian and “insurgent” is often blurry.

The most authoritative review of all the mortality estimates — passive and active — appeared in the professional journal [Conflict and Health](#) in March 2008, and concluded that population-based surveys are superior (for the reasons discussed here), and that “of the population-based studies, the [Hopkins] studies provided the most rigorous methodology.” The passive reporting, these experts agree, suffers from under-reporting and inability to capture indirect deaths, and thereby called into question the estimates of IBC, the Brookings index, the U.N. office in Baghdad, and other such efforts.

There is also the matter of corroborating evidence, which typically is overlooked. Two pieces in particular are powerful. The first is the number of displaced Iraqis, estimated between 3.5 and 5 million. Hundreds of interviews of those in Syria and Jordan suggest nearly all fled because of violence in their neighborhoods. No war has produced more than about a 10 to 1 ratio of displaced to dead, and in most wars the ratio is about 5 to 1 or narrower. The 5 to 1 ratio would translate into at least 700,000 deaths in Iraq.

The second and less reliable number is the overwhelming number of widows, some from earlier wars, which the Iraqi government has variously estimated at about 750,000.

The evidence, then, is rather clear and compelling. Something like 700,000 or more Iraqis have been killed either through direct or “structural” violence in the period since the U.S. invaded more than seven years ago. The number could easily be as high as a million. Most were killed by other Iraqis, or the deplorable conditions that wars wreak and persist in Iraq.

Do the numbers matter? Are 115,000 less morally onerous than a million? Well, yes. But that is not the point here. The major news media in this country supported the invasion. It’s an embarrassment that the war was not only fought on false premises that they in effect

promoted, but that the consequences have been so devastating, with more fatalities than were attributed to Saddam Hussein.

What else explains this negligence apart from stubborn unwillingness to learn the science of conflict mortality? Possibly, they fear a right-wing backlash or government opprobrium. But this cowardice has its consequences, too. For more than a year, the Republicans have woven a victory narrative about Iraq, and arguing that shaky case is easier with the lower mortality figures. Whether the American public cares about the deaths of others is a debatable proposition. But the media's negligence surely serves to make the next invasion easier.

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