

New study says US war has killed 655,000 Iraqis

By the editorial board
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According to a study published Wednesday in the British medical journal the *Lancet*, the US invasion and occupation of Iraq are responsible for the deaths of an estimated 655,000 Iraqis.

The survey of Iraqi casualties was conducted by a team of Iraqi physicians under the direction of epidemiologists at Johns Hopkins University's Bloomberg School of Public Health in Maryland.

The estimate of the researchers is more than 12 times the figure of 44,000 to 49,000 civilian deaths given by the British group Iraq Body Count, and nearly 22 times the figure of 30,000, "more or less," mentioned by President Bush in a December 2005 press conference.

The number of estimated deaths of Iraqis since the invasion corresponds to 2.5 percent of the population of Iraq. A matching percentage of the US population of 300 million would be 7.5 million—nearly the entire population of New York City.

The number of 655,000 represents the "excess" deaths caused by the American invasion and occupation. This is the difference between the number of people killed since March 2003 and the number of deaths that would be expected on the basis of pre-war death rates.

Of the total number of war-related deaths, an estimated 600,000 died as a result of violence, including gun shots, car bombs and other explosive devices, and air strikes. An estimated 31 percent of these, or 186,000, are attributed by the study directly to coalition forces—that is, these Iraqis were killed by the American military or its allies. According to the study, gunshot wounds caused 56 percent of violent deaths—an extraordinarily high figure that points again to the direct role of the US military.

An additional 24 percent of war-related deaths are attributed to other sources, including sectarian killings and suicide bombings, while 45 percent are classified as unknown.

These figures give a partial picture of the consequences of a war crime of vast dimensions. US imperialism has laid waste to an entire country and killed a significant proportion of the population in order to seize control of Iraq's vast oil resources and establish a hegemonic position in the Middle East. The *Lancet* report stands as an indictment not only of the Bush administration, but of the entire US political establishment.

Death on such a scale was an entirely foreseeable result of the invasion of Iraq. The US attack has produced a social catastrophe of historical proportions.

The nightmare of death and destruction unleashed by the US gives the lie to all of the claims, beyond the phony allegations of weapons of mass destruction and Iraqi support for Al Qaeda, advanced to justify the war—that it was launched to liberate the Iraqi people, that it is a war for democracy and freedom, etc.

The report states that the US intervention has killed more than twice as many Iraqis in the space of three-and-a-half years than were killed by the regime of Saddam Hussein in the course of its 24-year reign, based on the estimate by Human Rights Watch of 250,000 to 290,000 killings under the deposed Baathist government.

The occupying forces are responsible not only for those they killed directly, but for all of the violence that has been unleashed by the invasion. The US policy of supporting different ethnic groups and pitting them against each other has led to the sharp increase in sectarian killings over the past year. The ultimate cause of all the deaths, as well as the uncounted injuries, lies in the decision to launch the war itself.

The 55,000 additional deaths from non-violent sources are attributed by the study to heart attacks, cancer, infant mortality and other illnesses. This increase is directly related to the destruction of Iraq's social infrastructure, including electricity, sanitation, clean water and medical care.

The immediate response of the Bush administration to the *Lancet* report was a predictable mixture of contempt and indifference. In a press conference on Wednesday, Bush called the figure of 655,000 "not credible" and said the methodology used in the study had been "discredited." He did not bother to explain the basis on which he dismissed the report.

For its part, the Pentagon responded by saying that it "regrets the loss of any innocent life in Iraq or anywhere else." The pro-forma character of this statement betrays the complete indifference of the US military. The Pentagon went on to claim, "It would be difficult for the US to precisely determine the number of civilian deaths in Iraq as a result of insurgent activity."

This statement, as with virtually all official US statements on Iraqi casualties, attributes the toll on Iraqi lives entirely to the resistance, not to US violence. This is yet another in the mountain of lies employed to justify the war.

Since the invasion, the US government has refused to release figures on the deaths it has caused. The US-backed Iraqi government has systematically underestimated the death toll, and has stepped up its policy of concealment in tandem with the increasing carnage from US military attacks, mass killings by death squads, and suicide bombings. Beginning in September, the government of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki barred the Baghdad morgue and the Health Ministry from releasing their own reports on deaths.

The *Lancet* study is the most credible estimate of deaths available, and is based on an entirely sound methodology. The figure of 655,000 is much higher than numbers reported by other surveys, including Iraq Body Count, because these other estimates rely on passive surveys of deaths reported in the press. This method is known to vastly underestimate actual deaths, since most killings go unreported. Iraq Body Count also includes only civilian casualties, while the *Lancet* report includes all deaths.

In an article on Wednesday, the *Washington Post* cited several researchers who backed the survey's findings, including Ronald Waldman, an epidemiologist at Columbia University, who said the survey methods were "tried and true" and that the results were "the best estimate of mortality we have" from Iraq. Sarah Leah Whitson, from Human Rights Watch, said that there was "no reason" to question the report's findings.

The *Post* noted, "Both this and the earlier [Johns Hopkins] study are the only ones to estimate mortality in Iraq using scientific methods. The technique, called 'cluster sampling,' is used to estimate mortality in famines and after natural disasters."

To arrive at their estimate, the researchers selected a random

population sample across different regions of Iraq and then calculated the number of deaths since the invasion of March 2003 in that sample. In total, 1,849 households were visited, and a member of the household was asked to report on deaths in the family from the period beginning 14 months before the invasion of Iraq through to the present.

To verify the reported deaths, the interviewers requested death certificates 87 percent of the time. Of those asked, 92 percent were able to give certificates.

After calculating the number of post-invasion deaths among the households sampled, the resulting figure was used to estimate the number of deaths for the population as a whole. Based on pre-invasion death rates, the researchers calculated the expected deaths during the same period. The difference between these two figures yielded the “excess” deaths produced by the invasion and occupation. The 655,000 number is a middle figure. The researchers reported that they were 95 percent confident that the actual number of deaths was between 393,000 and 943,000.

Even if one assumes that the low-end of their estimate is correct, the death toll is staggering, with the US military directly responsible for more than 110,000 violent deaths.

Claims that the Johns Hopkins research methods are unsound were also used in an attempt to discredit an earlier report that estimated 100,000 excess deaths in Iraq from March 2003 to September 2004. The new study gives independent confirmation of that figure, yielding on the basis of an independent sample an estimate of 112,000 during that same period.

In answering a question on the *Lancet* report during his press conference on Wednesday, Bush’s comments reeked of stupidity, indifference and imperial arrogance. Acknowledging that “a lot of innocent people have died,” Bush said he applauded the Iraqi people “for their courage in the face of violence.”

“This is a society which so wants to be free that... there’s a level of violence they are willing to tolerate,” Bush said. The truth is the exact opposite. The violence is a product of colonial subjugation of a population that overwhelmingly opposes the presence of foreign troops in Iraq. Recent polls have found that at least 60 percent of the population supports attacks on US military forces.

At the same time, Bush indicated that the level of killing will increase in the coming period. He declared that it is “time for the Iraqi government to work hard to bring security in neighborhoods”—a reference to US demands for a violent crackdown on Iraqi resistance, particularly on anti-American Shiite militias. Last weekend, US forces carried out a major action in Diwaniyah, a city south of Baghdad, against militias associated with Shiite fundamentalist cleric Moqtada al-Sadr.

Also on Wednesday, the US Army said that it planned to keep troop numbers at current levels through 2010. Army Chief of Staff Peter Schoomaker said the move was intended to insure that “I can continue to shoot as long as they want us to shoot.”

Washington has used the alleged killing of smaller numbers of people by other governments as a pretext for military attack. The Clinton administration and the media made vastly exaggerated and entirely unsubstantiated claims of Serbian killings of Albanian Kosovars in early 1999 to justify the US plan

to launch an air war against the former Yugoslavia. At that time, figures in the area of 100,000-200,000 were tossed out and the regime of Slobodan Milosevic was roundly accused of genocide.

However, following the air war, the Tribunal on War Crimes in Kosovo issued an estimate of Albanian deaths from Serb attacks plus the US-led NATO bombing campaign at between 2,000 and 3,000. This figure is obviously dwarfed by the death toll resulting from the US rape of Iraq. But there are no charges from any section of the US political establishment, from either of its two parties, or from the media of genocide in Iraq.

While Milosevic, at the behest of Washington, was put on trial at the Hague for war crimes, the very suggestion that Bush and the top policy makers—Cheney, Rumsfeld, Rice, Powell, Wolfowitz—who conspired to launch an unprovoked war against Iraq should suffer a similar fate would be denounced on all sides as nothing short of treason.

The scale of death and destruction in Iraq has been systematically concealed from the American people, with the complicity of the mass media and the Democratic Party.

There has been very little reporting on the recently launched military operations in Iraq, in both Shiite and Sunni areas. US troops have been conducting neighborhood sweeps, seizing and arresting an untold number of people. How many thousands of people have been killed during the latest round of military aggression? Without any independent reports of what is going on, it is impossible to know.

The silence of the media and both parties reflects the American ruling elite’s contempt for human life in general, and the lives of Iraqis in particular.

The attitude of the Bush administration and the Democrats stands in sharp contrast to the sentiment of broad sections of the US population, who are increasingly disgusted, horrified and shamed by the brutality unleashed by the US invasion in the name of the American people.

The only party in the November elections that represents this growing opposition is the Socialist Equality Party. In its election program, the SEP calls for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all US troops from Iraq—the elementary precondition for putting an end to the brutal and ongoing slaughter.

The SEP demands that those responsible for the war be tried as war criminals. The election program also calls for the US government to compensate the Iraqi people for the destruction and suffering it has caused, as well as the families of American soldiers killed in the war and the men and women who have been wounded, both mentally and physically.

The war in Iraq has been waged in the interests of the American ruling elite, not the American people. The SEP calls for a break with the two parties of big business and the building of a new socialist party of the working class. The only viable basis for a struggle against imperialist war is the development of a mass socialist movement against the two-party capitalist system.

We call on all those who oppose the occupation of Iraq to vote for the SEP candidates where they are standing. Study our program, donate to our election fund, and contact the SEP to participate in our campaigns. Join the SEP and help fight for a socialist alternative to war and social reaction.

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