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An Argument for Documenting Casualties

Violence Against Iraqi Civilians 2006

Katharine Hall, Dale Stahl

Prepared for the Office of the Secretary of Defense

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Summary

The problem of measuring the number of civilian fatalities in Iraq gained widespread media coverage when the *Lancet* published a study in October 2004 claiming that more than 100,000 Iraqi civilians had been killed since the U.S. invasion in March 2003. The authors of this study later released another report, published in October 2006, asserting that 655,000 Iraqi civilians had been killed since the invasion.¹ The findings of both *Lancet* studies were widely debated along with other efforts to count civilian fatalities, such as the Iraq Body Count (IBC). This debate has highlighted the problems associated with measuring civilian fatalities in a violent, unstable situation.

Until recently, the U.S.–led Coalition did not have a formal system for documenting the level of violence directed at Iraqi civilians; the only publicly available sources of data were independent studies (*Lancet*, IBC), United Nations figures, and Iraqi government statistics. Because protecting the population is one of the central tenets of U.S. COIN doctrine, it can be surmised that trends related to Iraqi civilian fatalities should be a chief concern for the U.S. military. Thus, in order to develop a better picture of what is happening to the civilian population and support the creation of more-effective strategies to protect it, this document examines and analyzes available data on violent incidents involving Iraqis. While these data provide insight into the nature and characteristics of this violence, what can be gleaned from nonmilitary sources is somewhat limited. This limitation suggests that

¹ Sarah Boseley, “655,000 Iraqis Killed Since Invasion,” *The Guardian*, October 11, 2006.

the U.S. military may wish to organize its own effort to gather this kind of information.

This document begins by evaluating the open-source data currently available. Much of these data are problematic because of how they were collected—e.g., through media reporting, politicized government agencies, or incomplete police or hospital reports—or because of their level of fidelity (i.e., there are limits on what can truly be known about violence from simple statistics). The first chapter of this document analyzes the problems associated with various collection efforts.

In response to these limitations, the RAND study team compiled a more robust dataset for 2006 by combining two extant databases, the IBC dataset and RAND's own RAND–Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism Knowledge Base dataset. Because of the means by which both of these sources collect information, the team was able to conduct a detailed coding of the new dataset to extract and standardize information. (Note that lack of detail and standardization is one of the main flaws associated with other data collection methods.) RAND's new dataset provides a great deal of relevant information about each violent incident, including attack type, target, weapon type, and location. This dataset provided the RAND study team with a basis for a thorough analysis of violence against Iraqi civilians in 2006.

Two of the key findings from the 2006 data analysis are (1) that the majority of attacks against civilians were directed at individuals without any identifiable affiliation and (2) that most attacks were carried out using firearms. These findings, among others documented in this monograph, imply a high level of widespread and regular violence beyond the spectacular and deadly attacks that result from car and suicide bombs. This type of violence has generated a large refugee problem and poses a significant challenge for both the Coalition and Iraqi Security Forces.

Important recommendations and conclusions for data collection can be drawn from this study's close examination of Iraqi civilian fatalities. As demonstrated through the analysis of the 2006 data, collecting detailed information on Iraqi fatalities is useful and necessary to accurately assess the level and nature of violence in the country. However, beyond some of the statistics set forward during the congressional testi-

mony of GEN David H. Petraeus, it is not clear that anyone in the U.S. military or Coalition is systematically collecting and analyzing these data. Had there been a more robust effort to collect accurate information on Iraqi civilians, military strategists and political leaders might have acted more determinedly to secure the civilian population prior to the carnage of 2006. The final chapter of this document reviews developments in 2007, in terms of the level of violence and the U.S. military's effort to catalogue it.

The Coalition, now under the guidance of General Petraeus, the author of the U.S. Army's December 2006 COIN field manual, has made the goal of securing the population the centerpiece of its strategy. Although General Petraeus' September 2007 congressional testimony demonstrates that the U.S. military has begun to collect data on Iraqi civilian fatalities, these data have not been made available, and it is thus difficult to determine their quality and accuracy. Consequently, this document concludes with a proposed framework for future collection efforts.