

A response from Iraq Body Count

17 May 2007

Bill Van Auken received the following letter from Bulent Gokay, research consultant for Iraq Body Count (IBC), in response to an “Exchange of letters with Iraq Body Count on Johns Hopkins study estimating 650,000 Iraqi war dead”, posted on the WSWWS on April 6.

Dear Bill Van Auken,

Thank you for your detailed and thorough response which I very much appreciate. As a result of some of your comments I feel it is important that I clarify some of my earlier points.

Our previous message was simply a summary of IBC’s official response to the study released by the *Lancet* medical journal in 2004. In order to respond to some of your points I need to move beyond this general (IBC) text. So, although I’m a founding member and a research consultant of the IBC team, I write here in an individual capacity.

Our aim in writing to you in the first place was not to undermine the results of the 2004 study by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health (I actually think this is a very valuable study), but to urge you to be more cautious in interpreting its findings because of the methodology used to generate its findings. There is nothing wrong in the cluster sampling method itself, though one can question whether the sampling was done correctly. But as with all surveying, the result is still an estimate, not an exact number. That’s simply because a sample of the population was interviewed instead of every person. I believe that those scientists and the epidemiologists behind the *Lancet* report should be commended for undertaking their research under dangerous conditions and with minimal resources. Efforts like theirs have consistently and powerfully drawn attention to the very serious level of human suffering in Iraq, which has resulted from the invasion and occupation of that country by the US forces and their allies. My main point of objection is to your presentation of the 2004 *Lancet* report as “the

only scientific investigation of Iraqi casualties” and “a meticulous epidemiological study,” and to the figures collated by the IBC as “the unattributed estimates of 60,000.”

I wish in no way to discredit the *Lancet* report. As I said before, I genuinely believe that it has played a positive role in highlighting the level of human suffering in Iraq. But it is not “the only scientific investigation of Iraqi casualties.” As you also indicated, “methodologically, the Johns Hopkins study was designed to produce an estimate...,” and this is where its real value lies—it is a useful estimate of human casualties which signifies the appalling level of devastation caused by the war in Iraq. There are other equally meticulous studies of the casualties in Iraq, not only the work of IBC, but also the Iraq Living Conditions Survey (ILCS), which (like the *Lancet* study) used the same statistical technique—cluster sampling, and the casualty numbers published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) which relies on information from hospitals, morgues, and municipalities in Iraq but also takes into account casualty reports from Iraq’s Ministry of Internal Affairs. All these studies have somewhat different purposes and different findings, which is understandable as it is notoriously difficult to get an accurate count of casualties in a war zone. In Iraq, as you know, it is made more problematic by inadequate census data, poor security, and the lack of an official civilian body count by those governments whose armies are still occupying Iraq.

So far, our exchange seems to be a matter of one side arguing apples and the other oranges, and I think perhaps I should have clarified more specifically what IBC’s purpose and remit is and how this differs from the work of the Johns Hopkins group. If the main purpose of IBC’s existence was simply to produce a body count, then there is not much to add to what we, and you, have already said. IBC’s team has never

claimed that its figures represent the total casualty figures, and indeed IBC has always stated that many deaths will go unreported. As I understand and as indicated on the web site, IBC's main purpose is to document how, where, when, and implicitly why people in Iraq are dying. And most importantly, on what grounds are we now able to reflect on our ability to respond to the acts of violence in occupied Iraq? Work so far produced by IBC researchers (in particular "Named and identified victims of the war in Iraq: a memorial, February 2006"; "Year Four: Simply the Worst," March 18, 2007; and Lily's regular weekly column, "A Week in Iraq") provides a starting point for understanding these questions, which makes IBC's work vastly different from that of any epidemiological study.

There can never be any precise, or for that matter "ball park" figure on deaths, simply because the necessary information will never be precise or complete. It is clear that social research is not a matter of identifying the authoritative source (and type of research) and then exploiting it for all it is worth, for the majority of the sources (and methodologies) are in some way inaccurate, incomplete or tainted by prejudice and self-interest. There also are problems of definition here—such as what constitutes a "violent death," who is a civilian and who is a combatant in a violent civil war, which came as a result of the US/British-led occupation of the country. If we don't want to preach to the converted, but rather generate a meaningful dialogue with the wider public we have to be armed with defensible facts, and move beyond "estimates," which requires being extremely "cautious" in putting forward our figures. Of course, as it is clearly acknowledged on the IBC web site, this inevitably leads to an undercount in gross terms, but the aim has always been to establish concrete figures in order to move to the next level of analysis, which is aptly summarised by the question—"Do the American people need to believe that 600,000 Iraqis have been killed before they say 'enough is enough'?" As you rightly and powerfully elaborated in your response, the US-led war in Iraq means in a practical sense "the systematic destruction of a people and their society"—this is what really matters.

I would like to emphasise again that these two "counts" differ in purpose. I hope that you can see that

IBC's more definitive treatment raises important issues that are absent when only aggregate numbers become important—for example, by giving real meaning to the "fog of war." Most importantly, the detail provided by IBC, which includes actual names in some cases, provides a human dignity that is lacking in mass numbers and thus a sense of connection and "personalization" of the war.

The findings produced by IBC and the Johns Hopkins study do not need to be considered opposite options. Taken together, with their different aims and methodologies as well as limitations, they provide a fuller picture of the human tragedy produced by this imperialistic war. Each type of survey possesses certain strengths and weaknesses, and considered together, and compared one against the other, there is at least a chance that they will reveal the true picture—or something very close to them. As your web site articulated on 26 July 2005 (James Cogan, "Study documents US-inflicted carnage on Iraqi people"), "the IBC dossier is a valuable contribution. It lends weight to the study published last October by *Lancet* magazine, which estimated that 98,000 Iraqis had lost their lives as a direct by-product of the US-led invasion—whether they died from violence or as a result of the social breakdown in the country. Both reports combat the attempt by the US-led occupation to conceal the real cost of the war by simply refusing to count the victims."

Greetings,

Bulent Gokay



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