

# Iraq: Civilian casualties spike in February

Naomi Spencer  
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In a sign of continuing instability in occupied Iraq, violent deaths rose again sharply in February and early March. New figures from the Iraqi government indicate that civilian casualties were 33 percent higher last month than in January.

The death toll, reported discreetly by American news outlets, contradicts claims of US leaders that the addition of 30,000 troops last year has quelled bloodshed. Indeed, the escalating violence underscores that the relatively lower official casualty rates of recent months have more complicated origins than the “more boots on the ground” explanation offered by the war’s planners.

Combined figures of the Iraqi interior, health, and defense ministries indicate that 721 Iraqis—636 civilians, 65 men working as police, and 20 Iraqi soldiers—were killed or found dead throughout the country over the month. A media report tally by ICasualties.org put security forces casualties at 110 for February, the highest since October. The Iraqi government also reported that least 847 people were wounded in February.

The Iraqi casualty count does not include those dead characterized by the US military as “suspected terrorists” or insurgent fighters, and is likely a substantial undercount of deaths. Nasser Omar Hassan, a Baghdad security analyst, commented to United Nations IRIN news service March 3, “The statistics on casualties are considered low, and are based only on police reports... the actual number is most likely higher, as many killings go unreported.”

Over the same period, 29 US troops were killed, and 270 were wounded, according to Defense Department statistics. The number of wounded has climbed every month since November.

Many of the February civilian deaths were caused by suicide bomb attacks on crowded markets and shrines in and around Baghdad, including a February 2 incident

in which 99 market-goers were killed. A February 24 suicide attack on Shiite worshippers on a pilgrimage to Karbala killed 63.

In the first five days of March, at least 62 Iraqi civilians and security workers have been killed, according to the ICasualties.org tally. On Monday, car bombings in Baghdad killed 26 Iraqis and injured at least 42 more, according to various press reports relying on police and hospital witnesses. The US military, without explanation for the discrepancy, reported only 11 deaths in the incident.

Witness accounts of the March 3 bombing reveal the ruinous state of Iraqi society as a result of the US occupation. Ahmed Naim, a shopkeeper in the area, told the *Los Angeles Times* that he was injured by shards from his storefront window and taken to a downtown hospital. Hospital staff were treating patients on the floor, he said. “I don’t know the reason why the government doesn’t build new emergency hospitals after five years now.”

According to the *Times*, survivors and those arriving on the scene helped to “ferry the dead and wounded to hospital, but they said the concrete barriers set up to deter such attacks made it difficult to reach the victims.”

Pentagon and Bush administration officials, pointing to the lower reported civilian and troop casualties, have insisted that “the surge is working.” In addition to the build up of active duty troops in Iraq, the US has taken a number of drastic policy measures to hold down the violence.

Since the beginning of the year, US forces have resorted to heavy air bombardments to destroy resistance, especially in Baghdad, where regions have been partitioned off along ethnic lines and blockaded with walls and checkpoints. Meanwhile, sections of the Iraqi bourgeoisie have cut deals with the occupation to decrease sectarian attacks in exchange for funding and

influence in the Iraqi puppet government.

These deals have considerably built up both Shiite and Sunni militias, composed of Iraqis formerly active in the anti-occupation insurgency as well as in the religious strife. However, as the two factions of the Iraqi elite vie for control of the country's parliament and oil wealth, the rank and file of the Shiite and Sunni militias have threatened to break away and call off their nominal ceasefire arrangements.

Such sentiments pose an enormous threat to the occupation's planners. First and foremost, the failure to suppress the Iraqi population and control the country's resources would have fatal consequences for the ambitions of the US ruling elite. Plans to "draw down" troop levels over the coming year have been significantly scaled back by the Defense Department out of concern that the insurgency could reignite.

Last month, the Pentagon Joint Chiefs of Staff announced that the military would begin drawing down troop levels, but planned to "pause" the drawdown in July at a level nearly 10,000 troops higher than before the surge was initiated last year. Calling plans for further reductions "premature," the Defense Department insisted that a force of 15 brigades—140,000 troops—would remain indefinitely.

On Tuesday, the highest ranking US military commander in the Middle East, Admiral William Fallon, reiterated this position in testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee. "We'll take actions based on the conditions that we find... I think nothing is written in stone."

Major General Mark Hertling, commander of US forces in northern Iraq, told Reuters Wednesday that the drawdown may have to be abandoned altogether if Iraqi officials didn't "move faster to create jobs and improve basic services," in the news agency's words. "I'm going to see more soldiers hurt and killed and we are not going to be able to reduce the number of forces," Hertling said, "because there's going to be more people out there planting bombs and shooting people."

The power struggle between Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish sections of the national bourgeoisie has deadlocked the central government. A bill was passed by the parliament early in the year that would have laid out the political autonomy of provincial authorities—considered by some military commanders as essential in lowering

resistance in some areas—but it was rejected by Nouri al-Maliki's presidency council last month.

The rejection was undoubtedly based in part upon provisions that would have lifted many restrictions on political participation of mostly Sunni former Baathists in October 1 provincial elections, threatening the dominance of Shia parties.

US policies have created an explosive situation. While the Shia-dominated government is determined to maintain control, authorities in the Kurdish north refuse to recognize Baghdad's control over the region's extensive oil fields. The Turkish government, which sees an autonomous Kurdish region as a threat to its own territorial holdings, has invaded the north with US support. Sunni militias have begun mutinying over unmet conditions for power and protection from death squads operating out of government ministries. Scores of bound and tortured corpses continue to be discovered each week.

Within the US, the appearance of success in Iraq is seen as crucial by the Bush administration. The surge in particular has been presented as a model for the innumerable future conquests in the so-called "war on terror," and the political ambitions of the Republican Party for continuing its hold on the executive branch depend to a large extent on holding down violence in Iraq.

Republican presidential nominee John McCain has placed the surge at the center of his election campaign and called his Democratic rivals "soft on terror" for criticizing the tactic.

For their part, while Democratic candidates Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama both posture as critics of the war, neither candidate advocates a swift or complete withdrawal, and both have affirmed their willingness to take the advice of military brass "from day one," regardless of the anti-war sentiment of the vast majority of the American people. At every turn over the past five years, the Democrats no less than the Republicans have facilitated and funded the Iraq occupation.



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