



Iraq by the Numbers

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Numbers impose a logic of their own that is difficult to refute. On Monday, four female suicide bombers killed more than 60 people in Iraq and wounded hundreds more, many of whom were participants in *Shi'a* religious celebrations. Undoubtedly, *Al-Qaeda* or other Sunni extremists were behind the killings that occurred by three of the women in Baghdad. It is almost certain, however, that the women who killed themselves in order to kill others were not motivated by *Al-Qaeda* and its dream of restoring the Caliphate and

Islamic rule in Iraq. Rather, in all likelihood, they were consumed by hatred, rage, despair and a deep desire to revenge the loss of loved ones. Such women – and their numbers are growing – are ideal targets for extremist recruiters.

I was asked a year ago about the possibility for a peaceful Iraq and without much hesitation I responded that the only hope for peace and harmony in Iraq was to partition the country. The statistics drove my conclusion. No matter how hard I tried I could not escape the daunting numbers, which painted a stark reality that many continue to ignore.

It is a fact that *Al-Qaeda*, at the hands of Zarqawi and his successors, has been responsible for numerous atrocities in Iraq, as was *Saddam* before them. These daily atrocities demonstrate an irrefutable pattern of ethnic killing for which *Shi'a* groups such as the *Sadr* brigades are as much to blame as *Al-Qaeda* and other *Sunni* factions and the previous *Baath* regime. Recently, *Al-Qaeda's* power in Iraq appears to be considerably reduced. Their last strong hold in the *Diyala* province is gone. As government forces, supported by U.S. troops, started their offensive in the province this week, several of the towns were already abandoned.¹ A recent drought in the area had already produced a small migration, and having been forewarned of the coming offensive the army found many uninhabited houses, where most of their occupants had left. Many members of *Al-Qaeda* had already fled Iraq and taken refuge in the Maghreb, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Thailand.



But, let me get back to the numbers. On the very conservative side, the Iraqi health Ministry puts the number of Iraqi civilian deaths during the past five years at around 200,000. Other research institutions (John Hopkins Bloomberg, Lancet and Opinion Research Business) put the estimate at

¹ Source Al-Jazeera – July 29th, 2008 – URL: <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/AA31F3AE-DD10-484A-9EA8-1635146F3436.htm>

600,000 to a million. That means that the population of close family and friends of the victims likely numbers in the millions. Each has the potential to turn to violence for the sake of revenge, without regard to ideology. *Sunni* blames *Shi'a* and *Shi'a* blames *Sunni*. The result, as we have seen this week, is for acts of revenge that indiscriminately target innocent by-standers as long as the victims can be identified as part of the sect responsible for the acts being avenged. The power of revenge rather than ideology is evident in the rise of female suicide bombers. Such acts by women are rare, but are far more likely if their children or other immediate family members have been murdered. I make these observations to explain the complexity of the current situation, which many in the West grossly over-simplify by simply pointing to *Al-Qaeda* every time there is a *Sunni* attack against the *Shi'a*. The magnitude of the ethnic killing has been so great that it is naïve to deny that a civil war can re-ignite at any moment. There is very little in the short run that can be done to restore normalcy and civility in Iraq. There may come a day in the distant future perhaps when the Kurds, the *Sunnis* and the *Shi'a* will forgive and forget and could live in peace in a unified Iraq. But for now, the number of dead and, more importantly, the number of loved ones who grieve for them, make that a virtual impossibility.

If history is to be our guide, we should also remember that Iraq is country arbitrarily drawn by the British when Gertrude Bell persuaded Churchill that an Arab country with British power behind them would make for a more stable region and in the long run a cheaper source for oil.² What was supposed to be a model for the entire Middle East, however, resulted in the death of almost 10,000 Iraqis when the British squashed the ensuing rebellion. The current situation is much the same, only the number of casualties has changed. We should also remember the words of Iraq's *King Faisal I* (1921 to 1933) who stated in his memoirs: "Regrettably, I can say there is no Iraqi people yet, but only deluded human groups void of any national idea."

Those analysts who give such importance to a lull in the violence in Iraq, regardless of whether it is attributable to a U.S. troop surge, are totally ignoring the larger picture. We may be able to control the Iraqi oil fields by force but, as four Iraqi women demonstrated this week, troops cannot make of Iraq a normal, functional society. The numbers of those alive who suffer from deep psychological wounds since the invasion of Iraq will not simply disappear. This week's ethnic bloodshed between Kurds and Turkmens and between *Sunnis* and *Shi'a* is a stark reminder of how repressed rage can instantly ignite into violence. That fact remains with or without the presence of *Al-Qaeda*. The body count and the pain are simply too great. If we really care about peace in this part of the world, we must create true "political space." Separation through confederation, with sharing of oil revenues, will provide the space for passions to cool and for each side to bury their dead, heal their wounds and hopefully begin anew.

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² Source: *Desert Queen: The Extraordinary Life of Gertrude Bell, Adventurer, Advisor to Kings, Ally of Lawrence of Arabia*, by Janet Wallach, Random House, 1996.)