

Post-surge violence: its extent and nature

What the detailed data tell us about Iraq's civilian death toll during 2008 and the long-term effect of the "surge"

First published December 28th 2008

Introduction

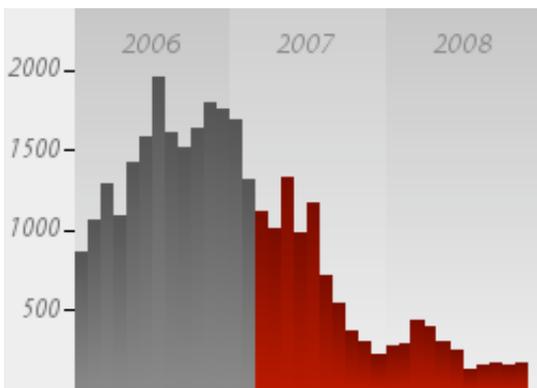
This analysis looks at trends. But when examining the violence afflicting civilians in Iraq's continuing conflict, a distinction must be drawn between abstractions represented by varying "rates" of violence and the reality of that violence for those experiencing it. Every statistic on this page can be traced to a human life violently ended, none of whom are any less a victim for having been killed during a "downward trend" in violence.

With only a few days of 2008 remaining, the year so far has seen another 8,315–9,028 civilian deaths added to the IBC database. ¹ This compares to 25,774–27,599 deaths reported in 2006, and 22,671–24,295 in 2007. This is a substantial drop on the preceding two years: on a per-day rate, it represents a reduction from 76 per day (2006) and 67 per day (2007) to 25 per day in 2008.

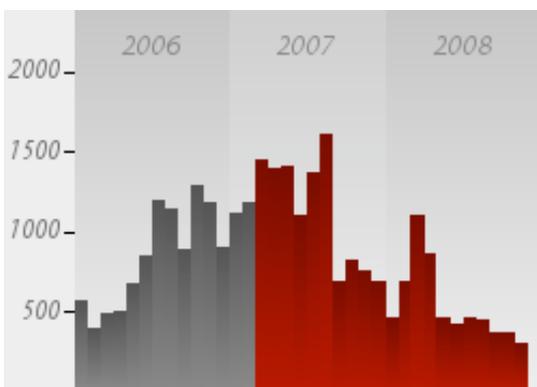
Alongside its recording of civilian deaths from violence since the 2003 invasion, Iraq Body Count (IBC) has been cataloguing a range of analysable variables detailing victims and the composition of violent events.

This analysis is an early update on the "post-surge" year 2008, and what it may tell us about the most intractable features of the violence in US-occupied Iraq.

NOTE: The graphs and some statistics on this page update dynamically as new data is processed. Graphs and comparative calculations are based on the upper figure in the IBC range. For more details see note 1.



Civilians killed in Baghdad



Civilians killed outside Baghdad

■ Pre-surge ■ Post-surge

¹ Figure includes preliminary count of 381 deaths for Dec 1st-21st. IBC figures are not estimates but a firm baseline figure for documented deaths, backed up by an online database detailing each incident and, where possible, every victim. The range given accounts for residual uncertainty about civilian status, the final death toll in larger incidents, and the possible double-counting of some deaths.

² These figures show that Baghdad still suffers disproportionately: with less than a quarter of Iraq's population, the capital still records about nearly a third of the country's civilian deaths from violence.

The most notable reduction in violence has been in Baghdad. For the first time since the US-led occupation of Iraq began, fewer deaths have been reported in the capital than in the rest of the country (from 54% of all deaths in 2006-2007 to 32% in 2008). ² Most of these reductions have been attributed to declining inter-communal violence.

Yet these improvements, as important and welcome as they are, can only be seen as a success when compared to the much worse conditions that prevailed in 2006-2007. Even within this timeframe, areas outside Baghdad have seen far less dramatic reductions in violence, and dozens of civilians are still being killed in conflict-related violence throughout Iraq on a relentless, daily basis. At 25 per day, the 2008 rate for violent civilian deaths is equivalent to that existing throughout the first 20 months of post-invasion Iraq, from May 2003 to December 2004 (15,355 deaths over 610 days).

The persistent problem

Why are civilians still being killed in such large numbers? Is there a realistic prospect for conflict related violence and civil insecurity to fall toward zero levels? Or is there a limit on the improvements current policies can bring?

Possible answers to these questions may be obtained by systematic analysis of detailed data on the killing of civilians — specifically, by asking:

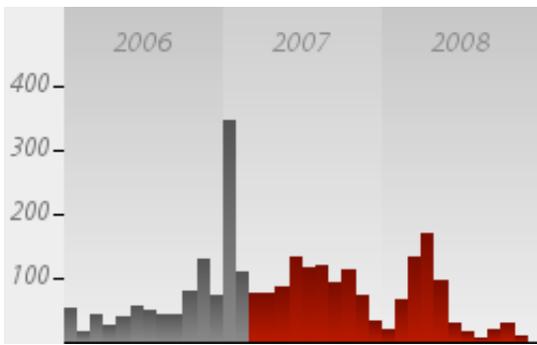
- Who is killing them?
- How are they being killed?
- Who is being killed?
- How do current patterns compare to earlier periods?

While definitive answers to these questions cannot be provided in current circumstances, examination of these data leaves little doubt that an irreducible portion of the violence that remains in Iraq is associated with the continuing presence of Coalition military forces in the country. Most unambiguous in this regard are deaths caused directly by Coalition forces; and greater in number, but just as intractable, are deaths attributable to Anti-occupation forces.

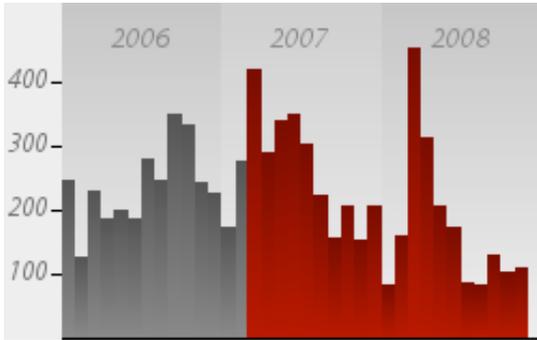
Still deadly to civilians: occupation and anti-occupation violence

Some three quarters of the reported civilian killings in Iraq since January 2006 have no clearly distinguishable perpetrator. This is particularly true in most instances of bodies being found after execution, or of attacks on what appear to be purely civilian targets, eg., car bombings of marketplaces and mosques. While inferences about perpetrators could be drawn from the circumstances surrounding some of these incidents, in the current IBC database these events are generally listed as incidents with *Unknown agents* as the perpetrator. ³

Most frequently identifiable are civilian killings caused by Coalition military or those who violently oppose them (17% of all deaths in 2006-2008). ^{3 4} While deaths caused by Unknown perpetrators have plummeted by 87% from the peak year of 2006, civilian deaths in these two categories have remained relatively constant throughout the last three years: 3,386 in 2006, 4,286 in 2007, and 2,384 in 2008 (by end November).



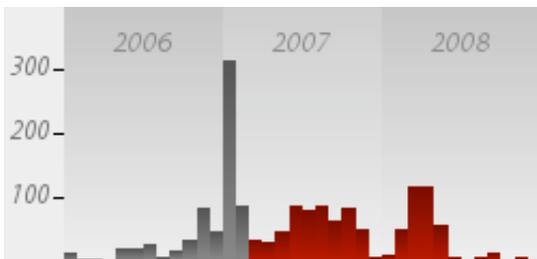
Civilian deaths involving Coalition forces



Civilian deaths involving Anti-occupation forces

■ Pre-surge ■ Post-surge

Because IBC does not record deadly incidents involving solely combatants (eg., incidents in which Coalition and Anti-occupation combatants were killed, but no civilians), the database is not a complete list of conflict-related events. But even the more directly conflict-related events like roadside bombs (long used to target military or Iraqi government convoys) and airstrikes regularly produce victims among the civilian population.



Civilian deaths from air attacks



Civilian deaths from roadside bombs

■ Pre-surge ■ Post-surge

While the USA has used a variety of means in its surge strategy, ⁵ military force has remained central, with the predictable outcome of new civilian lives lost. Airstrikes — the most frequent mode of US military attack involving civilian victims — have continued with regularity throughout the surge, killing 252 civilians in 2006 then — in the surge years — 943 in 2007 and 365 in 2008 (by end November).

Looking at the trendline for civilians killed by roadside bombs, which rarely target civilians directly (except the Iraqi police, whom IBC includes in its count — see next section below), we see that a key military-targeted phenomenon has scarcely changed in intensity since 2006, at least insofar as its deadliness to civilians is concerned — killing 1,423 in 2006, 1,174 in 2007, and 1,106 in 2008 (by end November).

³ **Unknown agents** are defined by IBC as: *Those who appear to attack civilian targets lacking a clear or unambiguous link to the foreign military presence in Iraq. This may include some overlap with other groups well as with criminal murders.* **Anti-occupation forces** are defined by IBC as: *Those who target US-led forces and who target ordinary police and other security forces, military installations and support workers for US-led forces.* See IBC's [2005 Dossier](#) for other categories (Glossary, p.26).

⁴ *Unknown agents* may contain both Coalition forces and, likely more often, Anti-occupation forces. To the extent that this is true, the case made in the present analysis will be strengthened. For further discussion of Unknown agents see The Killers Fact Sheet 1 in IBC's [2005 Dossier](#) (pp. 10-11).

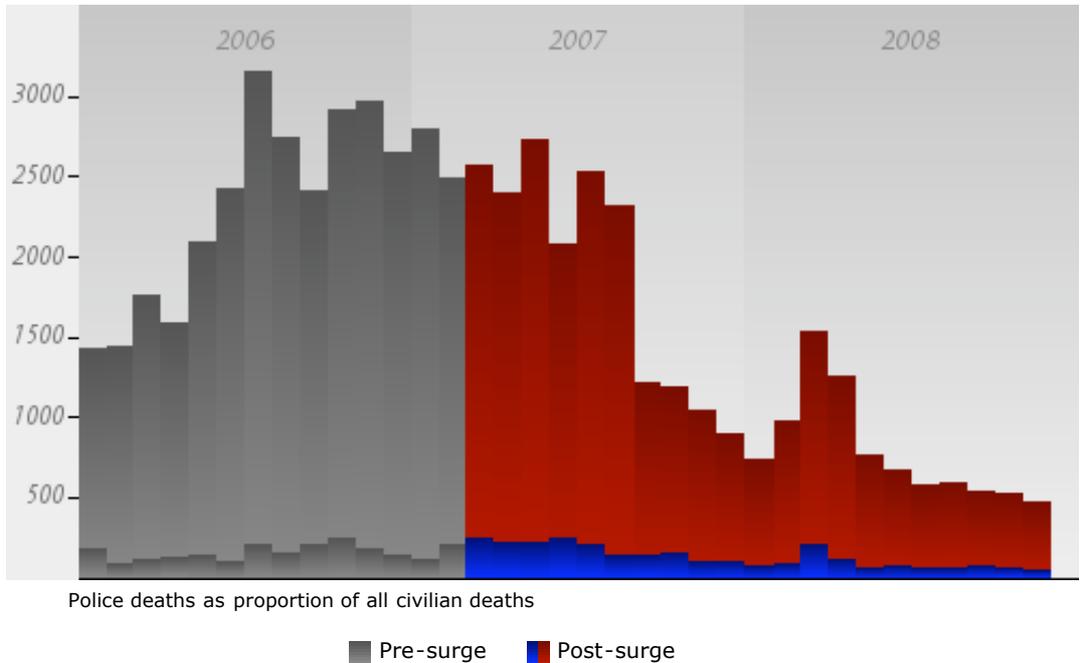
⁵ Arguably as important, if not more so, have been a raft of non-violent tactics, truces and closer collaboration with Iraqis. For a discussion of this see [A Different Surge](#) (Paul Rogers, Apr 2008)

Still in the line of fire: Iraqi security workers

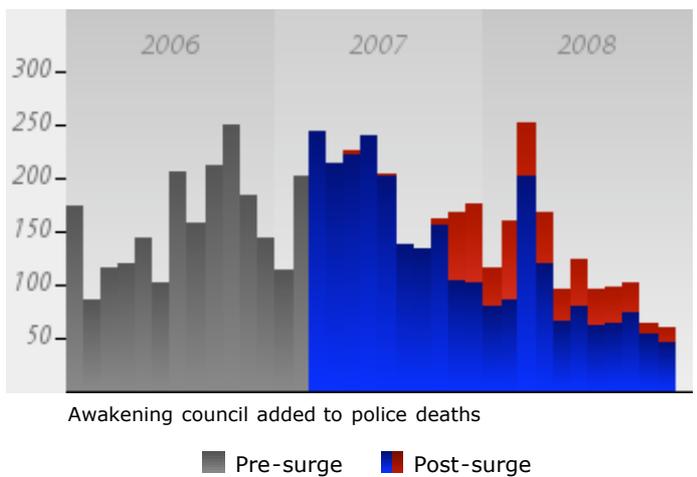
Another constant feature of the post-invasion conflict has been attacks on the country's police, who have presented a relatively "soft" occupation-associated

target by comparison to well-armed and better protected foreign troops. Police remain preferred targets, although in significantly lower numbers than at the peak killing rates of late 2006 and early 2007: during the entire year, 1,891 police were reported killed in 2006, 2,065 in 2007, and 928 in 2008 (by end November). ⁶

⁶ IBC includes in its count ordinary, but not paramilitary "commando" or "national" police units. See IBC's [Methods, 3.3](#) for more details.



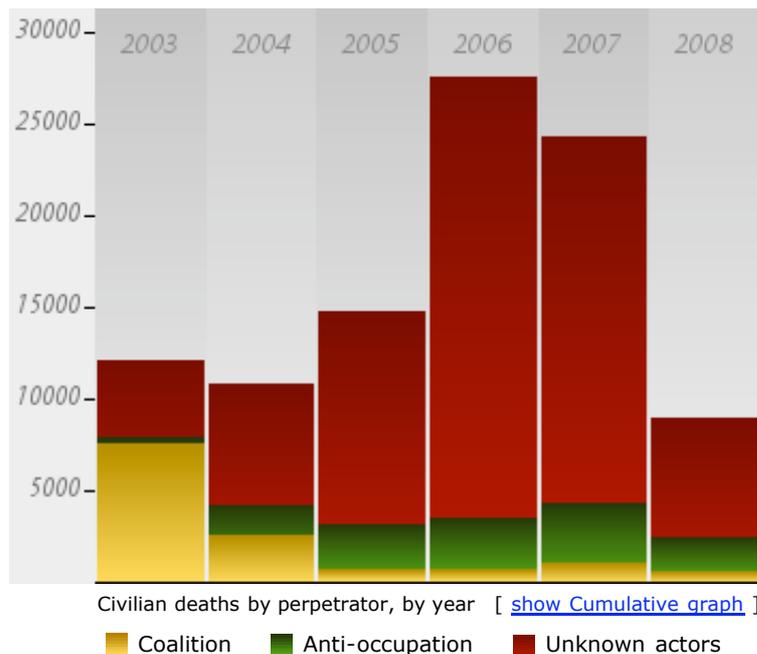
However, where formerly it was police who were being targeted, it is now Awakening council members who are increasingly being attacked. Victims appear to have at least partially moved from one group responsible for localised civil security to another taking up essentially the same duties: from October 2007 to end November 2008, 549 Awakening members were killed, compared to 1,287 regular police.



Conclusion

Deaths are unchangeable facts of history whose number can only be cumulative. For as long as conflict related deadly violence persists in Iraq, more lives and more families will be added to its toll of victims. Thus, "fewer

victims than in 2007” is an abstraction imposed by a frame of measurement: the stark reality is that some 9,000 *more* Iraqi civilians have had their lives violently cut short since the end of 2007, most of them anonymously and with little public recognition. ⁷



⁷ The very minimum recognition for the dead is to record how many died, where and when (which is infinitely better than not recording them at all). But it is individuals who die and are mourned, which is why IBC does as much as is currently possible to document all available personal and circumstantial details for every person killed. See IBC's [Rationale 1.3](#) and the [Individuals](#) section of the IBC Database.

Improvement to the dismal security environment in Iraq is significant, and brings new hope to those whose safety and sense of security has genuinely been improved. IBC's focus and priority, however, is with the victims who continue to be added to the war's toll on a daily basis.

Despite the evident improvements over most of last year, some of which may be attributable to wide-ranging changes in specifically US policies and actions, the remaining security problems may signal the limits of what can be achieved during (and by) this military occupation.

US military withdrawal may hold risks for Iraq, but an orderly withdrawal is what the majority of its people have been calling for in poll after poll since the invasion. What remains certain is that Iraq under occupation is fraught with dangers for the civilian population, dangers which will never entirely go away before the occupation does.