



Update: The Iraq War Ledger

A Look at the War's Human, Financial, and Strategic Costs

Matthew Duss and Peter Juul | December 2011

The United States is withdrawing the last of its troops from Iraq this month, which makes now an appropriate time to begin weighing the costs and benefits to U.S. national security from our intervention there.

On May 1, 2003, President George W. Bush stood aboard the deck of the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln and declared to the country and to the world that “Major combat operations in Iraq have ended. In the battle of Iraq, the United States and our allies have prevailed.”

As Americans would quickly find out, President Bush’s declaration of victory was severely premature. Iraq would soon be in the throes of a violent insurgency and, eventually, a full-blown sectarian civil war.

More than eight years after that speech, as President Barack Obama prepares to keep his promise to end the war, Iraq has made progress but still struggles with insecurity and deep political discord. Though the level of violence has remained down from its 2006–2007 peak—when dozens of bodies could be found on Baghdad’s streets every morning—Iraq still endures a level of violence that in any other country would be considered a crisis. Still, the end of former Iraq President Saddam Hussein’s brutal regime represents a considerable global good, and a nascent democratic Iraqi republic partnered with the United States could potentially yield benefits in the future.

But when weighing those possible benefits against the costs of the Iraq intervention, there is simply no conceivable calculus by which Operation Iraqi Freedom can be judged to have been a successful or worthwhile policy. The war was intended to show the extent of America’s power. It succeeded only in showing its limits.

The tables and charts below tell the tale. We have grouped these costs into three categories:

- The human costs, dealing with American and Iraqi casualties
- The financial costs, dealing with the expense of the war and of the continued care for its veterans

- The strategic costs, dealing with the impact of the Iraq intervention on U.S. power and influence in the Middle East and on the global stage

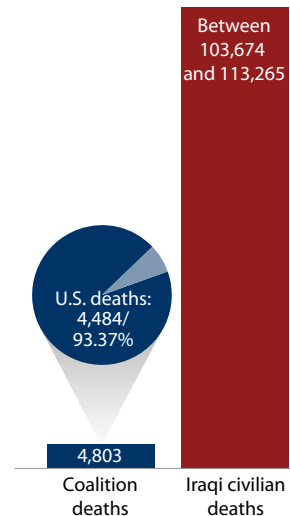
Before turning to those tables and charts, however, we would like to make two additional points.

First, it is critical to remember the shifting justifications for the U.S. intervention in Iraq. The Iraq invasion was sold to the American public on the basis of Saddam Hussein's supposed possession of weapons of mass destruction and his alleged relationship with Al Qaeda. When both claims turned out to be false, the Bush administration justified the intervention on the idea that a democratic Iraq would be an ally in the "war on terror" and an inspiration for democratic reform in the Middle East. These arguments remain, at best, highly questionable.

Second, the authors would like to make clear that this analysis of the costs of the Iraq war in no way diminishes the sacrifice, courage, and honor displayed by the U.S. military in Iraq. Americans troops have served and died in Iraq at the behest of the American people and two of their commanders-in-chief. This is why it is important to draw the correct lessons from our nation's invasion of Iraq. In order to do that, its costs must be examined honestly and rigorously.

Human costs

- **Total deaths:** Between 110,663 and 119,380
- **Coalition deaths:** 4,803¹
- **U.S. deaths:** 4,484²
- **U.S. wounded:** 32,200³
- **U.S. deaths as a percentage of coalition deaths:** 93.37 percent
- **Iraqi Security Force, or ISF, deaths:** At least 10,125⁴
- **Total coalition and ISF deaths:** At least 14,926
- **Iraqi civilian deaths:** Between 103,674 and 113,265⁵
- **Non-Iraqi contractor deaths:** At least 463
- **Internally displaced persons:** 1.24 million²³
- **Refugees:** More than 1.6 million⁷



Financial costs

- **Cost of Operation Iraqi Freedom:** \$806 billion⁸
- **Projected total cost of veterans' health care and disability:** \$422 billion to \$717 billion⁹

Strategic costs

The foregoing costs could conceivably be justified if the Iraq intervention had improved the United States' strategic position in the Middle East. But this is clearly not the case. The Iraq war has strengthened anti-U.S. elements and made the position of the United States and its allies more precarious.

Empowered Iran in Iraq and region. The Islamic Republic of Iran is the primary strategic beneficiary of the U.S.-led intervention in Iraq. The end of Saddam Hussein's regime removed Iran's most-hated enemy (with whom it fought a hugely destructive war in the 1980s) and removed the most significant check on Iran's regional hegemonic aspirations. Many of Iraq's key Iraqi Shia Islamist and Kurdish leaders enjoy close ties to Iran, facilitating considerable influence for Iran in the new Iraq.

Created terrorist training ground According to the U.K. Maplecroft research group's most recent index, Iraq is the third-most vulnerable country in the world to terrorism.¹⁰ The years of U.S. occupation in Iraq created not only a rallying call for violent Islamic extremists but also an environment for them to develop, test, and perfect various tactics and techniques. These tactics and techniques are now shared, both in person and via the Internet, with extremists all over the region and the world, including those fighting U.S. troops in Afghanistan.

Loss of international standing. While abuses are perhaps inevitable in any military occupation, the images and stories broadcast from Iraq into the region and around the world have done lasting damage to the United States' reputation as a supporter of international order and human rights. Gen. David Petraeus has said that the damage done to the United States' image by Abu Ghraib is permanent, calling it a "nonbiodegradable"¹¹ event.

Diverted resources and attention from Afghanistan. Rather than stay and finish the job in Afghanistan as promised, the Bush administration turned its focus to Iraq beginning in 2002, in preparation for the 2003 invasion. Special Forces specializing in regional languages were diverted from Afghanistan to Iraq, and Predator drones were sent to support the war in Iraq instead of the hunt for Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Stifled democracy reform. While the Arab Awakening of 2011 is a potentially positive development, there's no evidence that the Iraq war contributed to this in any positive way. A 2010 RAND study concluded that, rather than becoming a beacon of democracy, the Iraq war hobbled the cause of political reform in the Middle East. The report stated that "Iraq's instability has become a convenient scarecrow neighboring regimes can use to delay political reform by asserting that democratization inevitably leads to insecurity." Rather than supporting democratic forces in neighboring Syria, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has repeatedly voiced support for Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad.

Fueled sectarianism in region. The invasion of Iraq replaced a prominent Sunni Arab State with one largely controlled by Iraq's Arab Shia majority. While the end of the oppression of Iraq's Shia majority is a positive thing, this shift has exacerbated regional tensions between Shia and Sunni, including in Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Lebanon, and Bahrain (where the U.S. Fifth Fleet is based). Lingering disputes in Iraq between Sunni and Shia Arabs, Kurds, and Turkmen also continue to invite exploitation by both state and non-state actors.

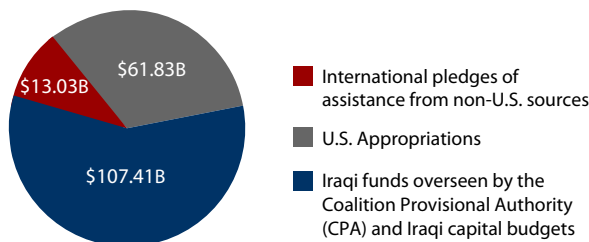
More detailed costs

Veterans

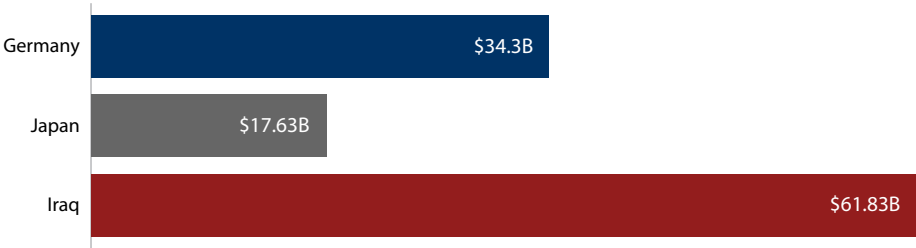
- **Total U.S. service members who have served in Iraq or Afghanistan:**
More than 2 million¹²
- **Total Iraq/Afghanistan veterans eligible for VA health care:** 1,250,663¹³
- **Total Iraq/Afghanistan veterans who have used VA health care since FY 2002:** 625,384 (50 percent of eligible veterans)
- **Total Iraq/Afghanistan veterans with PTSD:** At least 168,854 (27 percent of those veterans who have used VA health care; does not include Vet Center or non-VA health care data)
- **Suicide rate of Iraq/Afghanistan veterans using VA health care in FY 2008:** 38 suicides per 100,000 veterans¹⁴
 - National suicide rate, 2007: 11.26 per 100,000 Americans¹⁵

Iraq reconstruction (as of September 30, 2011)¹⁶

- **Total funding:** \$182.27 billion
- **Iraqi government funds (including Coalition Provisional Authority spending):**
\$107.41 billion
- **International funds:** \$13.03 billion
- **U.S. funds (2003-2011):** \$61.83 billion
 - Total U.S. unexpended obligations: \$1.66 billion



Comparative U.S. Post-World War II reconstruction assistance¹⁷ (1946-1952)
2011 dollars



Source: US Occupation Assistance: Iraq, Germany, and Japan Compared, CRS, 2006 (pg. CRS-2, CRS 10-13)

Economic and quality of life indicators

	Prewar	2011
Iraqi oil production	2.58 million barrels per day	Q4 2011: 2.56 million barrels per day ¹⁸
Iraqi electricity production	Nationwide: 3,958 megawatts Hours per day (estimated): 4-8	Q4 2011: ¹⁹ Nationwide: 7,316 megawatts Hours per day (non-KRG provinces): 8
Telephones	Cell phones: 80,000 Land lines: 833,000	Q4 2011: Cell phones: 23 million ²⁰ Q3 2011: Landlines: 1.2 million homes ²¹
Water	12.9 million people had potable water	2011: 24 million people have potable water ²²
Sewerage	6.2 million people served	January 30: 11.5 million people served
Internal refugees	1,021,962	August 2011: 1,242,568 ²³
Iraqi refugees	500,000	January 2011 (including Jordanian and Syrian government estimates): 1,644,579 Iraqi refugees settled in the United States (as of June 10, 2011): 63,400 ²⁴

Displaced minority populations: ²⁵

Total decline in minority population: 2.46 million to 4.29 million
At least 47.5 percent of total minority population

	Prewar	2011	Fled
Christians	1.4 million	400,000-600,000	800,000- 1 million
Turkmen	800,000	200,000	600,000
Sabaeans	60,000-70,000	5,000-10,000	50,000-65,000
Yazidis	600,000-700,000	Less than 500,000	100,000-200,000
Shabaks	400,000-500,000	200,000-500,000	100,000-300,000
Feyli Kurds	1 million- 1.5 million	100,000-120,000	880,000- 1.4 million
Kaka'is	200,000	60,000-70,000	130,000-140,000

Sources: Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, "January 2010: Quarterly Report to Congress" (2010), pg. 23, 29, 38, 50-51, 55; Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, "Applying Iraq's Hard Lessons" (2009), pg. 23; Brookings Institution: "Iraq Index" (2010).

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Endnotes

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- 2 Ibid
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