



The Iraq War Ledger

A tabulation of the human, financial and strategic costs

By Matthew Duss, Peter Juul, and Brian Katulis | May 6, 2010

As we approach the date of full U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, now is an appropriate time to begin to weigh the total 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 soon find out, 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.

Seven years after that speech, Iraq has made progress, but still struggles with terrorism and deep political discord. Though the level of violence has declined from its 2006-07 peak—when dozens of bodies could be found on Baghdad’s streets every morning—Iraq still endures a level of violence that anywhere else in the world would be considered a crisis. Still, the end of Saddam Hussein’s brutal regime represents a considerable global good, and a nascent democratic Iraqi republic allied 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 Iraq 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

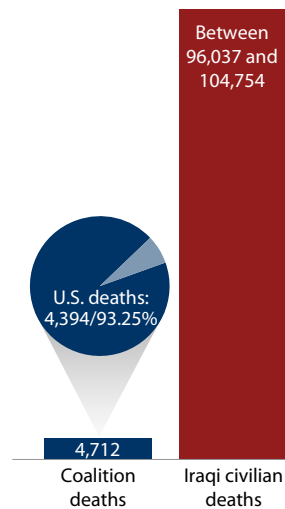
Before turning to those tables and charts, however, we would like to make two additional points.

First, it is critical to remember the shifting justifications for the Iraq invasion. The Iraq war was sold to the American public on 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 highly questionable.

Second, the authors would like to make clear that this analysis of the cost of the Iraq war in no way diminishes the sacrifice and honor displayed by the U.S. military in Iraq. Americans troops have served and died, and continue to serve and die, 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:** 4,712
- **U.S. deaths:** 4,394
- **U.S. wounded:** 31,768
- **U.S. deaths as a percentage of coalition deaths:** 93.25 percent
- **Iraqi Security Force deaths:** At least 9,451¹
- **Total coalition and ISF deaths:** At least 14,163
- **Iraqi civilian deaths:** Between 96,037 and 104,754²
- **Non-Iraqi contractor deaths:** At least 463³
- **Internally displaced persons:** 2.6 million⁴
- **Refugees:** 1.9 million⁵



Financial costs

- **Cost of Operation Iraqi Freedom:** \$748.2 billion⁶
- **Projected total cost of veterans’ health care and disability:** \$422 billion to \$717 billion⁷

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, Iraq is the most vulnerable country in the world to terrorism. 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.⁸

Loss of moral authority. 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 acknowledges the damage done to the U.S. reputation by Abu Ghraib is permanent, calling it a "nonbiodegradable" event.⁹

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 in 2002. Special Forces specializing in regional languages were diverted from Afghanistan to Iraq,¹⁰ and Predator drones were sent to support the war in Iraq instead of the hunt for Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan.¹¹

Stifled democracy reform. A recent RAND study concluded that, rather than becoming a beacon of democracy, the Iraq war has 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."¹²

Rising 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

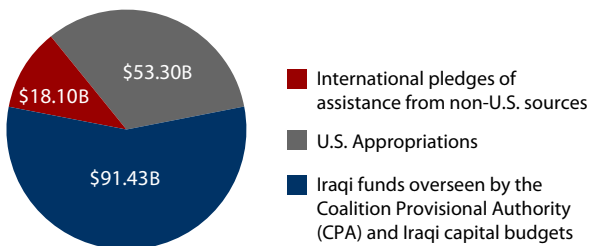
- Total U.S. service members deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan: At least 2 million¹³
- Total Iraq/Afghanistan veterans eligible for VA health care: 981,831 (through May 2009)¹⁴
 - Active component veterans: 504,962 (51 percent of total)
 - Reserve/National Guard veterans: 476,872 (49 percent of total)
- Total Iraq/Afghanistan veterans who have used VA health care since fiscal year 2002: 425,538 (43 percent of eligible veterans)
 - Active component veterans: 224,232 (44 percent of eligible veterans)
 - Reserve/National Guard veterans: 201,306 (42 percent of eligible veterans)
- Total Iraq/Afghanistan veterans with PTSD: At least 101,882 (Veterans Health Administration data only; does not include Vet Center or non-VA health care data)
- RAND study PTSD estimates: 13.8 percent¹⁵ (276,000 given 2 million deployed soldiers)
- RAND study traumatic brain injury estimates: 19.5 percent (390,000 given 2 million deployed soldiers)

Iraq reconstruction¹⁶

Since 2003, the United States has appropriated or otherwise made available \$53.31 billion for the reconstruction effort in Iraq. This quarter, the Congress authorized an additional \$200.0 million for the Commander's Emergency Response Program for Iraq and \$382.5 million for the Economic Support Fund.

As of March 31, 2010, nearly **\$162.83 billion** had been made available for the relief and reconstruction of Iraq. These funds came from three main sources:

- Iraqi funds that were overseen by the Coalition Provisional Authority and Iraqi capital budgets—**\$91.43 billion**
- International pledges of assistance from non-U.S. sources—**\$18.10 billion**
- U.S. appropriations—**\$53.30 billion**

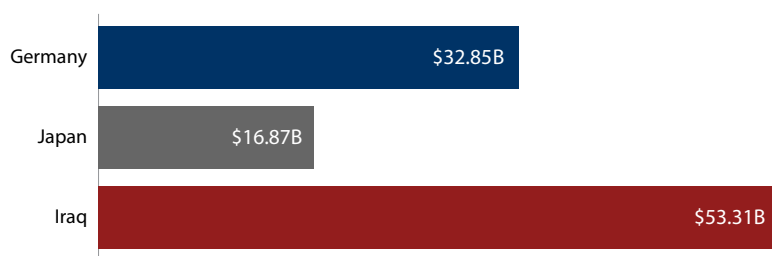


Economic and quality of life indicators

	Prewar	2010
Iraqi oil production	2.58 million barrels per day	March 24: 2.26 million barrels per day
Iraqi electricity production	Nationwide: 3,958 megawatts Hours per day (estimated): 4-8 Baghdad: 2,500 megawatts Hours per day: 16-24	March 3: Nationwide: 6,090 megawatts Hours per day: 15.0 Baghdad: N/A Hours per day: 15.5
Telephones	Land lines: 833,000 Cell phones: 80,000	January: Landlines: 1,300,000 (4.3 percent of population) Cell phones: An estimated 19.5 million (68 percent of population)
Water	12.9 million people had potable water	January 30: More than 21.2 million people have potable water
Sewerage	6.2 million people served	January 30: 11.5 million people served
Internal refugees	1,021,962	March: At least 1.5 million people are currently displaced inside Iraq
Refugees	500,000 Iraqis living abroad	March: Approximately 2 million Iraqis, mainly in Syria and Jordan

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).

Comparison: U.S. Post-World War II reconstruction assistance to Germany, Japan, and Iraq (in current dollars)



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

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