

**‘What were the causes and consequences of Iraq’s descent into violence after the initial invasion?’**

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## **Introduction: the extent of the violence in Iraq.**

The violence that has engulfed Iraq since 2003 consists of three overlapping conflicts. The first is the fighting caused by the invasion itself and the continued presence of US troops in the country. The second, the insurgency that erupted in the summer of 2003, where numerous disparate and localised groups sought to drive US forces from Iraq. The third, the civil war that engulfed Iraq in 2005 and raged until 2007. In the case of all three conflicts the actions of the US-led coalition either directly caused the rising violence or policy decisions they imposed contributed to its escalation.

Before assessing the causes and consequences of the violent aftermath of regime change it is important to assess the extent of civilian casualties across Iraq. Given the ferocity of the conflict, the data on casualties is understandably variable and open to dispute. One of the most widely accepted medical surveys of Iraqi casualties was published in *The New England Journal of Medicine* in January 2008. It estimated that between January 2002 and June 2006, 151,000 people were killed in violent deaths.<sup>1</sup> The non-governmental organisation Iraq Body Count has collected documentary evidence from the media which suggests figures of between 93,795 and 102,330 civilian deaths.<sup>2</sup>

A clear trend in civilian casualty figures is also detectable (see figure 1), beyond several specific spikes, the number of violent civilian deaths steadily increased from May 2003 until February 2006. By the time of the Iraqi elections of 2005, the conflict undoubtedly met the standard and widely accepted academic definition of civil war, which places the casualty threshold at 1,000 battlefield deaths per year in a “primarily internal” conflict, “pitting central government forces against an insurgent force capable of effective resistance”.<sup>3</sup> However, the rate of violent civilian deaths steeply increased after 22 February, 2006 when the al-Askariyya Mosque in the northern Iraqi city of Samara, a site revered in Shia Islam, was destroyed in an incident calculated to accelerate the sectarian murder rate. The United Nations in Baghdad estimated that 34,452 civilians were killed in 2006.<sup>4</sup> If there were any doubts that these figures amounted to a civil war, the nature of the violence and the associated population transfers should have put pay to that. After the al-Askariyya bombing, estimates based on anecdotal evidence placed the number of Sunnis murdered in extra-judicial killings in Baghdad at 1,000 per month with 365,000 Iraqis forced from their homes.<sup>5</sup> Violent deaths peaked in January 2007 when 3500 people were murdered.<sup>6</sup> Since February 2007 and the start of the Bush Administration’s new Iraq policy, ‘the surge’, civilian deaths dramatically dropped to between 200 and 300 civilians a month.<sup>7</sup>

## **Debating the causes of violence in Iraq.**

Analytical disagreements surrounding the causes of violence in Iraq have much greater significance than the academic debates they may originally have sprung from. The conscious and subconscious / overt and covert explanations of Iraq’s descent into violence shaped the policies pursued by US and Iraqi governments as they attempted to stabilise the country. The vast majority of the popular debate and policy discussion surrounding the Iraq conflict were dominated by two separate arguments. One blames the ethnic and religious divisions in the country which pre-date the invasion while the other cites the continued presence of US troops in the aftermath of the invasion.















