

Discussion of “Conflict Deaths in Iraq: A Methodological Critique of the ORB Survey Estimate”

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The fundamental position of the Spagat and Dougherty paper is that ORB’s research “overestimates the number killed in Iraq by a large margin.” At the same time the paper states that “all credible sources on conflict mortality since the 2003 invasion have shown a staggering level of human losses suffered by the people of Iraq.” The first part is clearly the author’s opinion, while we welcome the second. The survey was *only an estimate* and the fundamental point of this and every other investigation into this subject remains the same i.e. there has been a very significant human cost associated with the conflict. We believe that this – the real human cost – should be the focus of attention not academic arguments attempting to provide a level of precision that could never be realized.

We have never described our survey as a ‘mortality study’ nor as a peer-reviewed piece of academic research. ORB is a polling agency, who together with our local Iraqi partners, have more than five years’ experience of undertaking qualitative and quantitative research throughout the country. Our findings were an *estimate* based on a survey - or opinion poll if it makes it clearer. We have repeatedly stressed that our work does only offer an *estimate*; again the key point is not whether we (or others) are 100% accurate but that the number of Iraqi deaths is of an order of magnitude such that, even taking quite extreme margins of error, any person interested in the fortunes of the country would agree that far too many innocent people have perished.

Some more specific points: We categorically reject the implication that there was any political motivation behind this work. This is pure speculation and out of keeping with a paper that seeks to offer a sense of academic rigour. The reader will appreciate that as regards timing of the original release correlation does not equal causation. It was not “timed to coincide with the... testimony of General David Petraeus” it simply came out at around the same time. Similarly the comments as regards Dr Munqith Dagher seem designed to persuade the reader by accusation rather than rational argument. At the time of the invasion he was motivated to conduct polls so that the opinions and experiences of the Iraqi people were heard. Any survey of Iraq opinion will tell you that the overwhelming majority of its people have, since 2003, wanted to see the back of the occupying forces. So opposition to US forces does not make Dr Dagher unique. There is absolutely no evidence to suggest that ORB has ever pursued a political agenda as regards Iraq.

On the subject of motivation we note that Dr Spagat is

very closely linked to Iraq Body Count (IBC). There is obvious potential for a conflict of interest here and one which may prevent an objective review of Iraqi casualty data. The paper could be seen as an attempt to deflect criticism of IBC’s approach and findings; findings which suggest a far lower number of casualties than does ORB’s work, or indeed that published by the John Hopkins University. Indeed the paper reads at times as more a document in support of IBCs approach than a critique of the ORB survey. ORB’s survey was self-funded and we believe that readers should be informed as to the source of funding for this current paper; given that it has been in preparation for over 18 months a significant amount of human resource will have been required to produce this document.

There are times when the paper resorts to mere speculation, presumably with the intention of building up doubt in the reader’s mind. The approach seems to be “if you throw enough mud...” Instances of this are speculation that field teams are free to pick and choose which questions they use (they are not); and that fieldworkers “purposefully manipulated the survey” so as to produce high estimates; where press release *headlines* are used to imply “fuzziness” (even though it is quite clear that the analysis is based on the same questions); and where presentational corrections made with the best intentions (such as where a table on religious affiliation in Baghdad was misspecified) are held up as instances of poor quality control. This all suggests that the authors had little intention of taking an objective view but are merely pursuing an agenda. It also shows a lack of appreciation for our interviewer training programmes, our rigorous quality control procedures and our strict multi-stage random probability sampling methods.

Numerous accusations of non or partial disclosure are made in the paper. We reject the notion that ORB has some obligation to engage with the authors to a greater extent than we already have; we have given of our time and provided information above that which we normally would (or are obliged to) for a published opinion poll. We have provided sufficient information for the authors to make an informed assessment of the survey methodology and leave it to them and others to either believe or disbelieve the findings. What we have learnt is that too many of those interested in Iraqi casualty figures (not just ORB’s) either want to discredit them absolutely, or to hold them up as irrefutable truth. The fact is that the true number of casualties will most likely never be known.

Ours and other studies suggest that hundreds of thousands of Iraqis died as a result (directly or indirectly) of the recent conflict and ensuing militia violence. The precise figure is, in

every sense, an academic question as even if it were technically possible its discovery would achieve nothing. In the real world it will not mean that a single person has or has not lost their life.

Michael Spagat and Josh Dougherty

We first summarize briefly our central arguments.

An *internal validity check* of ORB data across three separate polls reveals internal contradictions indicative of compromised data collection practices which greatly exaggerate the resulting estimate (section 4 of the paper). In particular, four governorates in central Iraq account for more than 80% of ORB's estimated one million deaths. Yet in these governorates a higher percentage of respondents report deaths of *household* members than report deaths of *extended family* members in another ORB poll conducted only six months earlier. This pattern can not be seen as credible since extended family networks are far larger than households. The percentage reporting deaths in the entire southern region of Iraq, on the other hand, does show the expected sharp drop between the two polls (from 35 to 7 percent) when ORB switches from its extended-family question to its household question. This more reasonable pattern casts the strongest doubt on precisely the data (in the four key central governorates) which provided the vast bulk (80%) of deaths in the "million" figure.

An *external validity check* exposes the ORB data as inconsistent with a large number of credible sources (section 7).

The ORB poll is also marred by a number of serious quality problems including (sections 2, 3, 5 and 6):

- a claimed margin of error of plus or minus 8% that is unrealistically narrow;
- critical problems with ORB's published mortality question that invite respondents to report both non-violent deaths and deaths of extended family members in what is purportedly a household survey measuring "murders";
- a failure to disclose key methodological information such as the exact wordings of its questions as asked in the field, i.e., in Arabic and Kurdish;
- an inadequate treatment of non-response in which ORB assumes that death rates of nonrespondents were identical to those of responding households;

Johnny Heald's response only engages slightly with two of the above points. First, on disclosure, he is correct that no formal mechanism exists to force ORB to disclose basic elements of its methodology such as the questions asked in the field or its sampling procedures. Yet Mr. Heald should also recognize that failure to voluntarily disclose important aspects of ORB's survey methodology can only undermine the credibility and usefulness of ORB's findings, which already seem incredible and of questionable utility for other reasons.

Second, Mr. Heald's response ignores the problematic internal validity check, and only indirectly acknowledges one secondary aspect of it by declaring that field teams are not "free to pick and choose which questions they use". This

appears to refer to what we describe as the "mistaken field-work scenario", one of the possible explanations we offer for the critical inconsistencies observed in the ORB data. It is reassuring that ORB does not allow its field teams to pick and choose questions, but we did not argue that such mistakes would have occurred with ORB's knowledge or endorsement. In fact, there is nothing in ORB's description of its methods to hint at how ORB would be in a position to know whether such mistakes occurred or not. More importantly, Mr. Heald makes no attempt to provide any alternative explanation for how the anomalous patterns uncovered in the internal validity check could have obtained.

ORB declared in successive press releases "More than 1,000,000 Iraqis murdered" and that "Further survey work... confirms our survey estimate". This is made more specific as "the estimated range is between 946,000 and 1,120,000." At one point ORB even suggested that it intended to try to publish its estimate in a peer reviewed journal as "the only way to put closure on it" and give its work "gravitas".¹ Now Mr. Heald writes that "the survey was *only an estimate*" (his emphasis) and that the purpose behind ORB's polling on this issue is not to produce an accurate estimate of war deaths, but only to convince the public that "there has been a very significant human cost associated with the conflict."² That is, ORB has gone from standing behind an extreme outlying estimate, presented as a highly precise range, to a vague observation of "a very significant human cost." But all good-faith observers of the Iraq war already believed this long before ORB initiated its work. At present, the ORB poll is viewed universally as a claim, credible or otherwise, that a million people had been killed violently in the Iraq conflict by the end of 2007. It appears that ORB itself no longer backs such a claim.

We now respond briefly to some of Mr. Heald's smaller points. Perhaps he is right that all the Iraqi field teams were able to purge all political feeling from their decision-making despite the fact that they were drawn from a population in which "the overwhelming majority... wanted to see the back of the occupying forces." Researchers elsewhere have often fallen prey to political motivation, and it is unwise to disregard this potential, particularly when faced with critical and obvious data inconsistencies such as those we observe in the ORB poll.

Heald also makes a number of insinuations and ad hominem arguments which are a distraction. We do not believe that a "link" to Iraq Body Count is a conflict of interest

¹ See Munro, Neil (2007), "Iraq's Slippery Polls", National Journal, December 1, which quotes Mr. Heald directly on this point. The same article also reports that according to Munqeth Dagher the ORB poll was, indeed, timed to coincide with the Petraeus testimony, contrary to Mr. Heald's current claim that this was entirely coincidental.

² This is a strange inversion of the usual *raison d'être* of public opinion polling, from one that aims to accurately measure public opinion, to one which aims to *change* public opinion. This goal is accomplished by providing a measurement of something that is not public opinion and for which accuracy is deemed an irrelevant "academic question".

in this situation. If it were, this would imply that researchers who have reached different conclusions on an issue are not allowed to criticize each other's methods or conclusions. If such a policy were followed, academic debate would grind to a halt.

Neither of us had any funding for this work.

We do not demand more precision than is possible with surveys and, in fact, criticize ORB for, among other things, claiming far greater precision than their data warrant. After publishing quite a precise estimate Mr. Heald now takes the position that "the true number of casualties will most likely never be known." He continues that this discussion is "in every sense, an academic question" by which he appears to mean that it is pointless.

We do not share Mr. Heald's pessimism. Through sustained effort it will be possible to achieve a full historical account of the human cost of the Iraq war. A strong precedent is the work of the Research and Documentation Center of Sarajevo which has spent more than a decade building a definitive account of the human losses due to the Bosnian

war. Moreover, we think that ORB's intervention in this issue has had practical, not just "academic" consequences, which will likely include the entrenchment of hatreds and misunderstandings, and possibly even incitement to further violence. Is Iraq's future doomed to feature different groups selecting favored estimates of war deaths from widely divergent claims and condemning each other as exaggerators or deniers? This is hardly any way forward for truth and reconciliation. It is worth citing the words of Mirsad Tokača of the Research and Documentation Center, discussing one of the reasons their work was needed:

*"Manipulations with numbers not based on facts or empirical research, appeared as the additional element for incitement of political atmosphere and deepening of misunderstandings instead of rational dialogue,"*³

³Zdravko Ljubas (2007), Bosnian book of death presented in Sarajevo, http://www.monstersandcritics.com/news/europe/features/article_1320691.php/Bosnian_book_of_death_presented_in_Sarajevo.