

U.S. Army (Kerry Solan)



Sentry with 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment passes Tomb of the Unknowns at Arlington National Cemetery

The Human Toll of Reconstruction During Operation *Iraqi Freedom*: Report Overview

BY STUART W. BOWEN, JR., AND CRAIG COLLIER

The Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction (SIGIR) recently released a special report entitled “The Human Toll of Reconstruction or Stabilization Operations during Operation *Iraqi Freedom*.”¹ Through this review, SIGIR sought to determine how many people—U.S. Servicemembers and civilians, third-country nationals, and Iraqis—were killed while participating in activities related to the rebuilding of Iraq’s infrastructure and institutions.

Our report reviewed personnel deaths caused by hostile acts between May 1, 2003 (the declared end of major combat operations in Iraq) and August 31, 2010 (the conclusion of Operation *Iraqi Freedom*). We found that during this period at least 719 people lost their lives while performing stabilization and reconstruction operations (SRO) missions, including 318 U.S. citizens, 111 third-country nationals, 271 Iraqis, and 19 others of unknown nationality. In addition, at least 786 people were injured; there were also at least 198 reported kidnappings of Iraqis and third-country nationals who were performing reconstruction- or stabilization-related missions.

For this study, SIGIR examined all available sources of information on casualties in Iraq, seeking to determine what losses occurred during SRO missions. We looked only at those personnel who died under hostile circumstances, excluding those killed by accident, suicide, homicide, or natural causes.

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The sources reviewed included classified and unclassified information from the Departments of Defense (DOD), State, and Labor; the individual military Services; the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE); the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID); contracting companies working on SRO tasks; and open-source data. We found that no integrated database tracking such casualties existed and that the agencies used differing accounting methods to track losses, which made arriving at a reasonably precise number exceedingly difficult.

For the purposes of the review, we postulated two ways a person could be considered to have been killed while engaged in SRO activities: the context of the casualty was inherently reconstruction (for example, a Civil Affairs soldier or a civilian assigned to a reconstruction contracting office); or the casualty occurred during an SRO-related mission (for example, an infantryman visiting a project or a civilian meeting with a government of Iraq official). Casualty reports from Iraq commonly did not

distinguish cause of death, complicating the assessment process. “Killed while performing a combat mission in Anbar Province,” for example, might be the extent of available information, without further notation as to whether the loss occurred during an SRO-related mission.

We divided SRO-related deaths into three subcategories:

- infrastructure and governance
- police training and development
- national-level security force development.

Infrastructure and governance included all projects addressing the civil reconstruction of Iraq or the development of its civil society. Police training subsumed all activities aimed at building up Iraq’s civil law enforcement capacity. National-level security force training embraced efforts to establish the Iraqi army, national police, and other federal security organizations. Table 1 summarizes the number of SRO-related deaths by these categories.

Table 1. Deaths Related to Reconstruction in Operation *Iraqi Freedom* (May 1, 2003–August 31, 2010)

	Infrastructure and Governance	Police Training and Development	National-level Security Force Training	Total
U.S. Military	119	97	48	264
U.S. Civilians	35	16	3	54
Third-country Nationals	107	4		111
Iraqis	240	22	9	271
Unknown	12	6	1	19
Total	513	145	61	719

As table 1 indicates, most of those killed on SRO missions were working to rebuild Iraq's infrastructure and government institutions (71 percent). Another 145 (20 percent) died while training the Iraqi police, with 61 (8 percent) killed working to develop the Iraqi Security Forces.

Given the evident database weaknesses regarding casualty tracking in Iraq, the numbers in table 1 amount to what should be viewed as the minimum level of losses incurred during SRO missions. As noted, records detailing military and civilian casualties frequently lacked sufficient information regarding the nature of the mission at the time of death, and open-source information proved only occasionally helpful as a gap-filler. In addition, USACE could only provide detailed data from May 2006 to August 2008 for casualties suffered by contractors working on USACE-supervised projects.

Due to these informational weaknesses, we were unable to identify the casualty context for just over 1,000 Servicemembers. Death records for third-country nationals and Iraqis were even weaker. The limits imposed by these accounting shortfalls prevented us from concluding, with any certainty, exactly how many people died while engaged in the reconstruction and stabilization of Iraq; the actual number is most certainly higher than the 719 identified.

Military Casualties

Over 20 percent of the 4,409 U.S. military casualties in Iraq were nonhostile deaths (see table 2).² Of the 3,479 hostile deaths, 3,376 were killed after major combat operations ended on May 1, 2003. SIGIR could only confirm the cause of death for 2,359 of the hostile deaths (70 percent). Of this complement, we

identified 264 persons who were killed while performing a stabilization or reconstruction mission (11 percent).

Not surprisingly, Army personnel accounted for most (2,535) of the hostile deaths that occurred during the time period we examined. Marines accounted for 851 deaths. We determined the missions for 1,840 of the Army casualties (74 percent) and 436 of the Marine casualties (55 percent), finding that 234 Army personnel (13 percent) and 21 Marines (5 percent) were killed while performing SRO-related activities. Far fewer Navy and Air Force personnel were involved in Iraq reconstruction programs and projects; four Sailors and five Airmen lost their lives while on SRO-related missions. Table 3 summarizes these findings.

Civilian Casualties

At least 455 civilians—including U.S. citizens, third-country nationals, and Iraqis—were killed by hostile acts while working on SRO programs or projects in Iraq. SIGIR identified 321 American civilians who died in Iraq of all causes. We could identify the missions at the time of death for 220 of them. Table 4 shows that 54 of the 220 American civilians killed in Iraq lost their lives while performing SRO-related missions (25 percent). The majority of U.S. civilians killed in Iraq while on reconstruction missions were contractors, most of whom were working in the infrastructure and governance areas (25). Another 16 civilians were killed while training the Iraqi police, and 3 were killed while training Iraqi national-level security forces.

Through information provided by USAID, USACE, the Army, previous SIGIR inspections, and open sources, SIGIR identified at least 111 third-country nationals, 271 Iraqis, and

Table 2. Total U.S. Military Casualties in Operation *Iraqi Freedom* (May 1, 2003–August 31, 2010)

Casualty Categories	Army	Navy ^a	Marines	Air Force	Total
Killed in Action	1,918	62	664	29	2,673
Died of Wounds ^b	610	1	187		798
Died While Missing in Action	3				3
Died While Captured or Detained	4	1			5
Total Hostile Deaths	2,535	64	851	29	3,479
Accident	413	19	121	13	566
Illness	72	9	6	5	92
Homicide	23	4	7	2	36
Self-inflicted	180	4	37	2	223
Undetermined	9	2			11
Pending ^c	1	1			2
Total Non-hostile Deaths	698	39	171	22	930
Total Deaths	3,233	103	1,022	51	4,409

^a Navy totals include Coast Guard.

^b Includes died of wounds where wounding occurred in theater and death occurred elsewhere.

^c Pending means final category to be determined at a later date.

Table 3. U.S. Military Casualties Related to Reconstruction or Stabilization in Operation *Iraqi Freedom* (May 1, 2003–August 31, 2010)

	Infrastructure and Governance	Police Training and Development	National-Level Security Force Training	Total
Army	113	87	34	234
USMC	2	10	9	21
Navy	4			4
Air Force			5	5
Total DOD Uniformed Killed in Action	119	97	48	264

Table 4. U.S. Civilian Deaths Related to Reconstruction in Operation *Iraqi Freedom* (May 1, 2003–August 31, 2010)

	Infrastructure and Governance	Police Training and Development	National-Level Security Force Training	Total
DOD	1			1
State Department*	6			6
United Nations	2			2
SIGIR	1			1
USAID				0
Contractors	25	16	3	44
Total U.S. Citizens	35	16	3	54

* Includes two civilians who were working for the Coalition Provisional Authority.

19 others (whose nationality was unknown) who were killed while working on SRO-related missions in Iraq. Comprehensive data on Iraqi SRO-related deaths were impossible to obtain, but of those we could identify, many were working as interpreters for U.S.-managed projects. We believe that there were significantly more Iraqi SRO-related casualties than the available data indicate.

Lessons and Opportunities for Future Study

Our human toll report offers two lessons for consideration:

- Planners should anticipate that SRO missions conducted in a combat zone will be inherently dangerous to everyone involved—American, foreign, or host nation, military or civilian—and should take steps to mitigate the risk.
- The U.S. Government’s poor data management systems obscured the true human

cost of SRO efforts in Iraq; an integrated system for tracking such casualties should be developed.

The casualty data we collected point to several areas for possible future study:

Police Trainer Casualties. The number of those killed training the Iraqi police was more than twice the number killed while training Iraqi national-level security forces (145 vs. 61). The high rate of loss in police training rather than national-level security force training raises a number of questions. Were there more police trainers than other, national-level transition teams? Were police transition team tactics, techniques, and procedures different from other military transition teams that had similar missions? Were treacherous Iraqi police complicit in attacks on police transition teams, as has been suggested in some open-source articles and appears to be happening with some regularity in Afghanistan? Did the location of many police transition teams in

Baghdad and their proximity to the most lethal of improvised explosive devices—explosively formed projectiles—account for the higher casualty rate? Explaining the high number of hostile deaths for police trainers and the disparity in casualties between the two transition team groups is worthy of more extensive review, especially for military police leaders who would most likely have this mission in any future SRO.

Army vs. Marine Corps Reconstruction Casualty Rates. The percentage of Army personnel killed while performing SRO missions (13 percent) was more than twice that of the Marines (5 percent). This discrepancy broaches several questions: Were the Marines more effective at managing security in the hostile SRO setting than their Army counterparts? Or (perhaps more likely) were Army units simply engaged in more SRO missions? Was the smaller percentage of Marine casualties attributable to their operating in a somewhat more permissive environment in Anbar Province before their Army counterparts elsewhere in Iraq? Or was the differential attributable to database issues?

Reconstruction Lives Saved vs. Lives Lost. U.S. counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine embraces the assumption that SRO efforts ultimately reduce violence. In Iraq, it was believed that angry local citizens took up arms against both the coalition and the nascent government of Iraq because of frustration with inadequate essential services. According to COIN theory, improving these services would remove a key source of conflict, reduce violence, win the restive citizenry's "hearts and minds," and weaken the insurgency. COIN doctrine also anticipated that putting local nationals to work would cut violence by providing a source of income through SRO projects, which would

make employed Iraqis less vulnerable to insurgent recruitment.

While this report does not address the effect of varying COIN practices, it does confirm the palpable and axiomatic fact that SRO efforts performed in a nonpermissive environment are highly dangerous for all involved. Moreover, we found that some of those local Iraqis we hoped to lure away from the insurgency's recruiting efforts through SRO projects became themselves targets of the insurgents. This raises an important issue: whether some reconstruction and stabilization efforts aimed at reducing violence actually contributed to a temporary up-tick in hostile activity. If they did, how can this unwelcome effect be ameliorated in future SROs?

Out of the last decade of SRO experiences, the Department of Defense has formally embraced stability operations as "a core U.S. military mission that the Department of Defense shall be prepared to conduct with proficiency equivalent to combat operations."³ Our experience in Iraq proved that stability operations conducted in a nonpermissive environment entail significant risk. How to mitigate that risk is a crucial task future leaders must tackle before the next SRO mission arrives. **PRISM**

Notes

¹ The full report is available at <www.sigir.mil/files/lessonslearned/SpecialReport2.pdf>.

² Casualty information from Operation *Iraqi Freedom* is available at <www.dmdc.osd.mil/dcas/pages/casualties_oif.xhtml>.

³ Department of Defense Instruction Number 3000.05, "Stability Operations," September 16, 2009, 2, available at <www.dtic.mil/whs/directives/corres/pdf/300005p.pdf>.