

Iraq: USCENTCOM and Iraqi Government Estimates of the Trends in the Patterns in Violence and Casualties

Anthony H. Cordesman

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The last few weeks have been filled with grim reports of suicide and bombing attacks in Iraq. They serve as a warning that the struggle against al Qaeda in Iraq, Shi'ite extremists in the Mahdi Army, and other causes of civil violence are not over. As U.S. officials and commanders have repeatedly warned, the situation is "fragile" at best.

At the same time, one has to be very careful about riding the headlines in assessing violence in Iraq. As ABC has reported, an Iraqi official has now released Iraqi estimates of the level of violence in Iraq, outside Kurdistan, and detailed estimates of the causes of violence and casualty levels in Baghdad. When these are compared with earlier data provide by USCENTCOM, they reveal both how far Iraq has come and how far it still has to go. They also show that the recent bombings are only part of the story and that estimates based either on the number of bombings or total killed tell only part of the story.

The Limits to U.S., MNF-I, and Iraqi Government Reporting on Patterns in Violence and Casualties

It is important to note, however, that neither U.S. nor Iraqi data can tell all—or sometimes even most—of the story. U.S. estimates are focused on violence and casualties directly related to the struggle against terrorism and ethnic and sectarian conflict. They do not count total violence or total killed and wounded, which involves significant numbers of criminal acts. Iraqi government counts are significantly higher because they count all casualties, but many are not war related or cannot be tied to an attack.

The Iraqi government data for killed present two additional problems. First, the totals for Iraq do not include Kurdistan. Second, the totals for Baghdad—which has been the center of most documented Iraqi violence and casualties—reports a general category called "bodies found" in addition to totals for Iraqi civilians and Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). It is not clear how much the total for "bodies found" does or does not overlap with the "killed" data for Iraqi civilians and security forces. Such reporting is valuable in a country where disappearances and kidnappings with fatal outcomes are a serious part of the violence, but it makes any estimates of total killed uncertain.

Moreover, coverage of violence and casualties is better in urban areas than in the countryside, where many acts of violence are not reported and where civilian death statistics are more uncertain. Moreover, civilian woundings are not included in either U.S. or Iraqi estimates of the total casualties. The dictionary definition of casualties includes *both* killed and wounded, *and this total is the only meaningful way of measuring levels of violence*. There has never been a clear correlation between the number killed in Iraq, or other similar conflicts, and the total of killed and wounded. Looking only at the patterns of killed is a consistently misleading way to understand the levels of violence affecting civil society and risk.

Categorizing kidnappings, property seizures, robberies, extortion, nonfatal kidnapping, rape, torture, intimidation, and force displacements add to the problem. The complex mix of insurgency and sectarian/ethnic civil violence, criminal activity, and crime by insurgents or militias has been a serious problem since late 2003. Surveys by ABC News indicate that the level has dropped significantly since mid-2008, but no meaningful data are available on these broader patterns of violence or their effect unless they produce a reported corpse.

They are a major—and perhaps dominant—part of the pattern of violence in terms of day-to-day impact on Iraq as a nation. There are, however, no data other than polling data that begin to provide a picture of what is happening. This may be particularly important in the future if Iraq does not establish a more effective rule of law than it has to date. Even if the level of insurgency, and sectarian and ethnic violence, steadily decline; the very high levels of youth and total unemployment can lead to high levels of violent civil unrelated to the past patterns of conflict.

USCENTCOM Reporting on Patterns of Conflict

This does not mean, however, that the data that are available are without value. They may not provide accurate estimates of the absolute level of violence and casualties, but they do provide at least a rough indication of the trends in the most important kinds of violence affecting Iraq's stability and prospects for political accommodation, the challenge to the Iraqi government in creating effective security forces, and the challenge to the United States in shaping its withdrawal in ways that leave a stable and secure Iraq.

USCENTCOM created a highly detailed analysis of the key patterns in large-scale, conflict related violence, and consistent estimates of the trends in Iraqi deaths. It has released newly updated statistics on the overall patterns of violence in Iraq, and estimates of civilian killed, through the end of April 2009.

As the Figures 1 and 2 show, there was a significant increase in both categories in April 2009. At the same time, Figure 1 shows that the overall trend in the levels of violence still fit within the pattern that developed in late 2008 and which has been consistent ever since. The total number of violent incidents first dropped below 400 in June 2008 and remained close to 400 through November 2008. It has since averaged below 200, but it has been far from zero. It has also remained a diverse mix of four major types of attacks:

- Attacks against Iraqi infrastructure and government organizations
- Bombs (IEDs and mines), both found and exploded
- Sniper, ambush, grenade, and other small arms attacks
- Mortar, rocket, and surface-to-air attacks

Figure 1 also shows that attacks have been dominated by bombings, and increasingly by personal suicide attacks—a kind of attack that is extremely difficult to halt in any society with free social movement. The use of widows, men motivated by revenge and honor killings, and ISF uniforms have compounded the problem. Iraqis are doing the bombings, and bombers look like anyone else; men in uniform and women who are hard to search make things worse.

It is equally important to look at the overall trend in casualties in the Figure 2. Once again, new updated figures are available from USCENTCOM. They do not show a rise, and the fact that there was a dramatic dip in February 2009 never meant that there would not be very bad months in the future. If one uses the Iraqi and coalition estimate—which is significant higher than the insurgency-related estimates of the coalition alone—the pattern that emerged from June 2008 on made it likely that there would be some 250 civilian deaths a month, with a higher number of wounded.

No one attempted to conceal this level of continuing violence or these risks. Ambassador Crocker and General Petraeus never talked about “victory.” They warned that there would be a continuing AQI and Mahdi Army threat, ongoing sectarian and ethnic tensions that would take years to turn into stable political accommodation—if this was possible at all. They made it clear that it would be at least several years before fully effective Iraqi Security Forces could be in place.

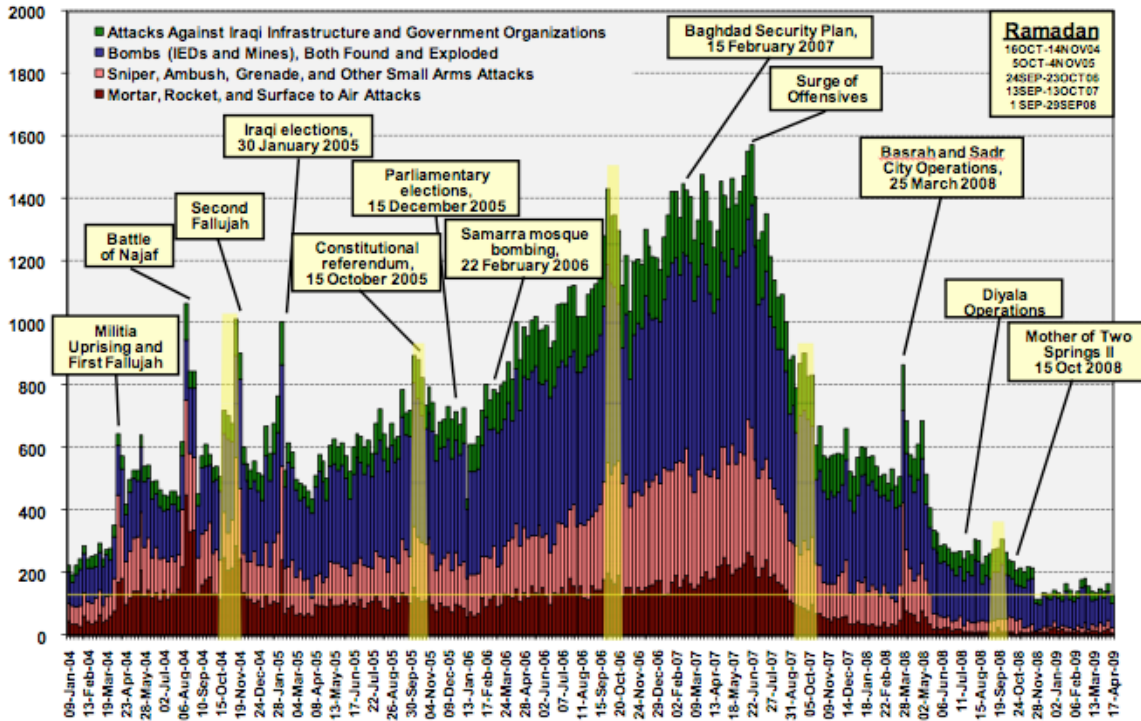
The current U.S. commander in Iraq—General Odierno—warned a year ago that the level of violence in Iraq might reach an “irreducible minimum” for several years. Reporting by the Department of Defense and State Department, testimony to Congress, warned that the future levels of violence would be driven by the fact Al Qaeda in Iraq would take time to defeat in detail, Shi’ite extremist element in the Mahdi Army, tensions between Kurd and Arab, and internal power struggles within Iraq’s key sectarian and ethnic factions.

The keys to eliminating this remaining level violence are clear—and they will require consistent U.S. effort through at least the end of President Obama’s first term. They are Iraqi political accommodation, the creation of fully effective Iraqi Security Forces, establishing a rule of law, and giving Iraqis—especially young men—employment and economic hope. These conditions will take at least three more years to create.

In the interim, there will be good and bad months, but no truly peaceful months. Jihadist threats like AQI will exploit every window of opportunity in the hope they can find some fault line that will drive Iraq back toward civil war and conditions where they have some hope of gaining power. They will do so regardless of whether the window is U.S. withdrawals, Iraqi internal tensions, or simply a target of convenience in a large market or during a religious holiday. Hard-line Shi’ite elements like the worst elements of the Mahdi Army, and neo-Ba’athist groups may do the same. These factions will also use violence to raise money, and get foreign volunteers.

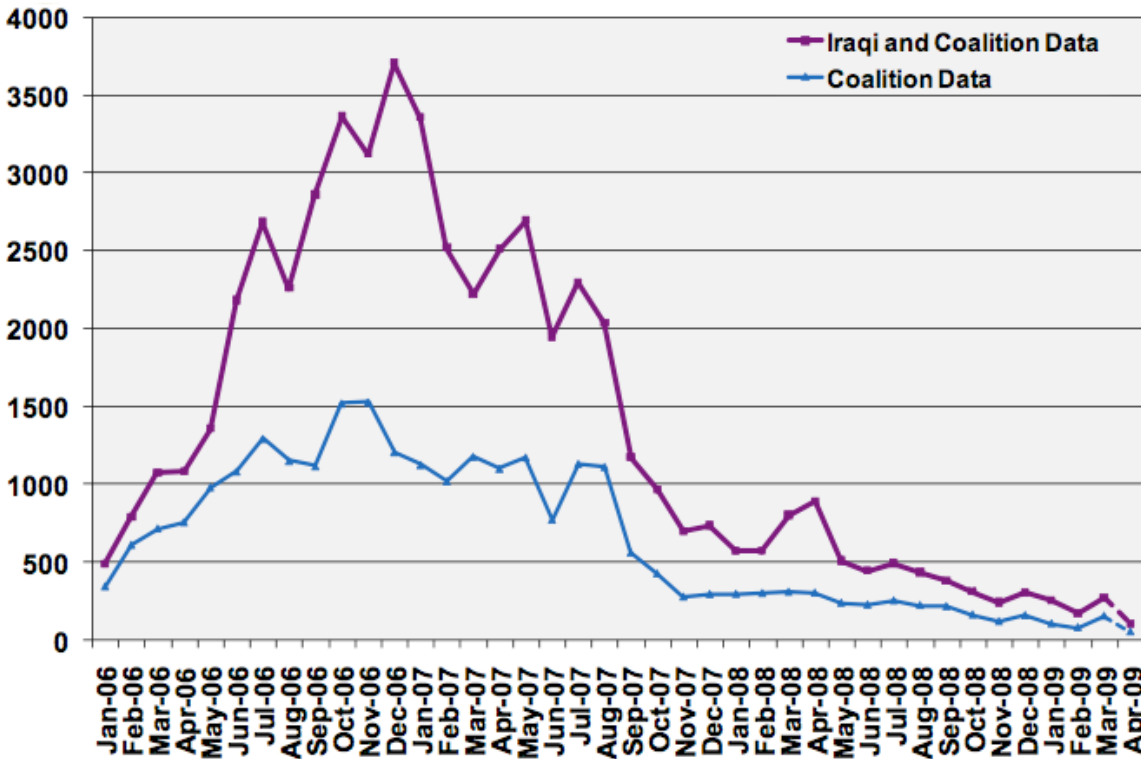
Both U.S. and Iraqi policymakers need to accept this reality to move forward. The present range of attacks is not a reason to assume Iraq is failing or reverting to civil conflict. It is a clear warning that it can do so unless Iraqis do move toward political accommodation, unless there is more rapid economic progress and Iraqi forces develop in ways that encourage political unity. They are also a warning that the United States still needs to focus at least as much on Iraqi stability and security as leaving Iraq.

Figure 1: Security Incidents in Iraq: January 2004–April 2009



Source: SIGACTS (CF Reports) as of 18 April 2009.

Figure 2: Trends in Civilian Deaths: January 2006–April 2009



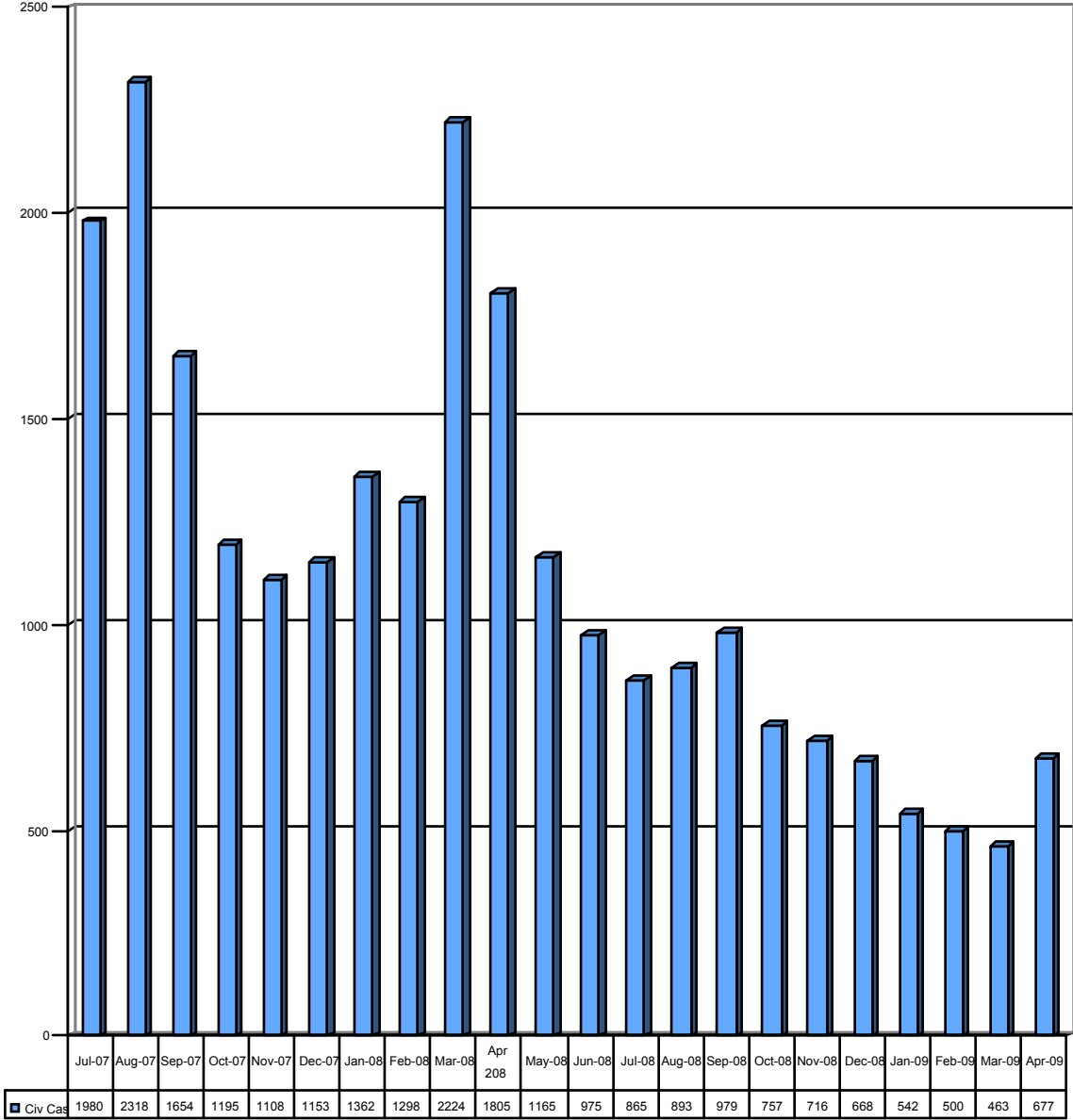
Iraqi Government Data on Total Killed and the Patterns of Violence and Casualties in Baghdad

An Iraqi government official has issued a separate set of data. These figures are shown in the charts and tables that follow and differ significantly from the data released by USCENTCOM for the reasons described in the introduction to this analysis. In broad terms, however, they all reinforce the point that the patterns of violence in Iraq have been consistently high enough to justify the concern shown by U.S. officials and commanders, but have not suddenly reversed themselves.

- Figure 3 shows the overall pattern of Iraqi killed. The Iraqi government totals for civilians killed in Figure 3 track closely to the totals in the Iraqi and coalition estimate in Figure 2. At the same time, they permit a closer look at the trends from July 2007 onward, and particularly from July 2008 onward. Once again, it is clear that the rise in violence in April 2009 is of concern, but it does not yet constitute a trend or deviate sharply from the overall patterns in killed.
- Figure 4 provides a different version of the data in Figure 1. It only covers Baghdad province, but it also covers a broader range of violence—although not extortions, kidnappings, displacements, etc. The trends in Baghdad, which has consistently been the most violent province in Iraq, do not show that same rise in the number of violent attacks as in killed. It also shows, however, that any analysis of violence based on bombings does not provide anything like an accurate picture of the true trends in the level of violent attacks. The overall patterns in all types of violence have been considerably more consistent. This does not make the kind of analysis in Figure 1 less valuable, since it highlights the most dangerous types. It does, however, warn that Iraq has not made the same progress in other types of violence.
- Figure 5 shows that the patterns in killed have only a limited correlation to the Iraqi count of the kinds of major violence tracked in Figure 4. This difference is less clear in the USCENTCOM data in Figures 1 and 2, but is still present. The data for April 2009 in Figure 5 are also a warning that the lethality of individual acts of violence is often more important than their number. The rise in killings in April 2009 is clearly driven by suicide and other bombings.
- Figure 6 shows the combined pattern in casualties for killed and wounded. If Figure 6 is compared to Figure 5, it is immediately apparent that data on the trend in killed does not correlate to the overall patterns in violence. Unfortunately, no data are available on such trends for Iraq as a whole. This is a warning about placing too much emphasis on numbers killed, but is also a warning that measuring progress in Iraq requires significantly better metrics, both to track the real patterns in insurgent, ethnic, and sectarian violence, and to track any later success in establishing a real rule of law.

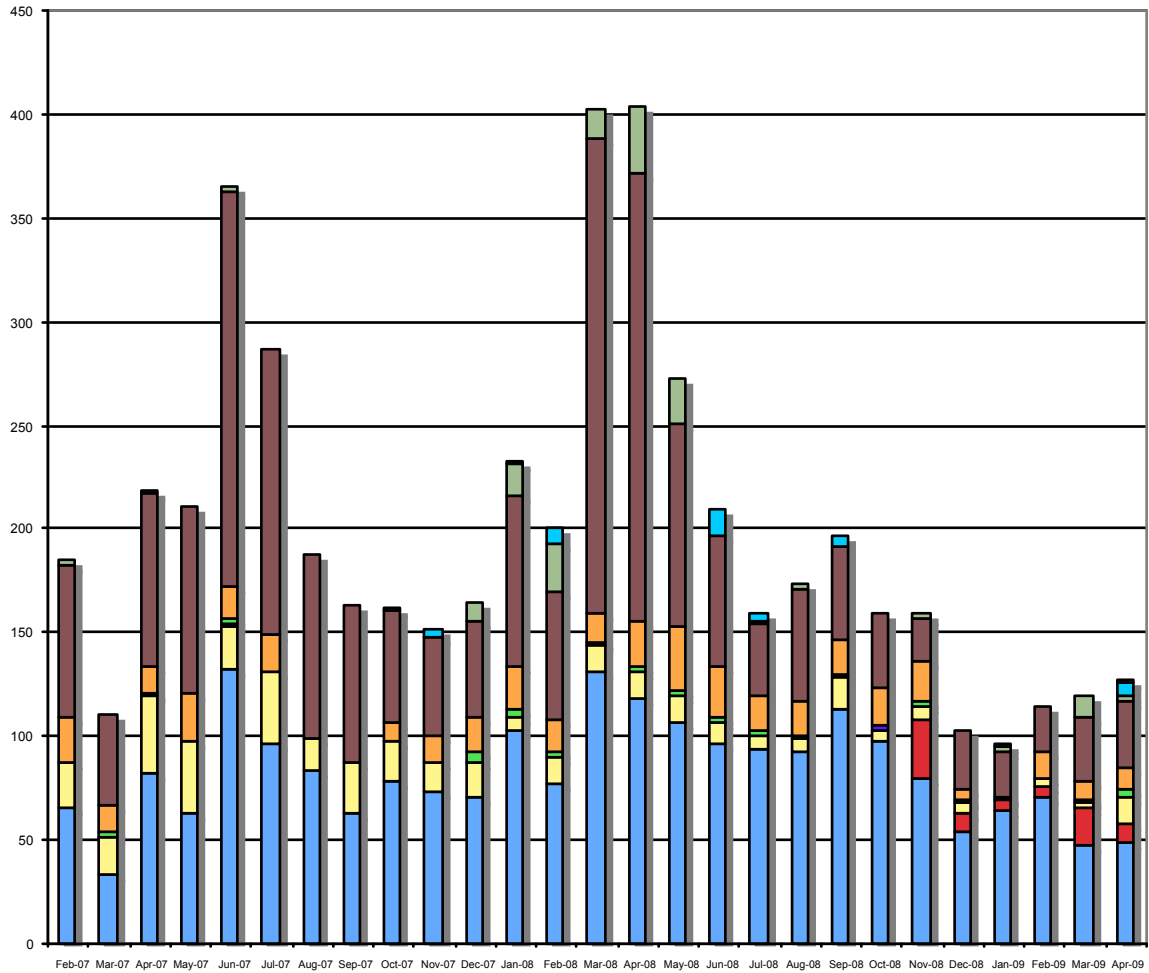
In short, the Iraqi data may differ in detail from the USCENTCOM data, but they lead to the same general conclusions. Iraq has made major progress since the worst days of the insurgency, but it has remained a fragile state. April 2009 has been a particularly bad month, but not the kind of sharp deviation that some media sources have implied. The real challenge is not what has happened over the last few weeks but the fact that the drop in insurgent activity and revenge killings in 2007–2008 never met that Iraq had yet achieved either security or stability. Once again, it is clear that this will require at least several more years of intense effort to achieve political accommodation and create a mix of Iraqi Security Forces that can replace U.S. and other coalition forces.

Figure 3: Iraqi Government Estimate of Civilian Casualties in All of Iraq, less Kurdistan—2007 to 2009



Source: An Iraqi government official and ABC News, May 1, 2009

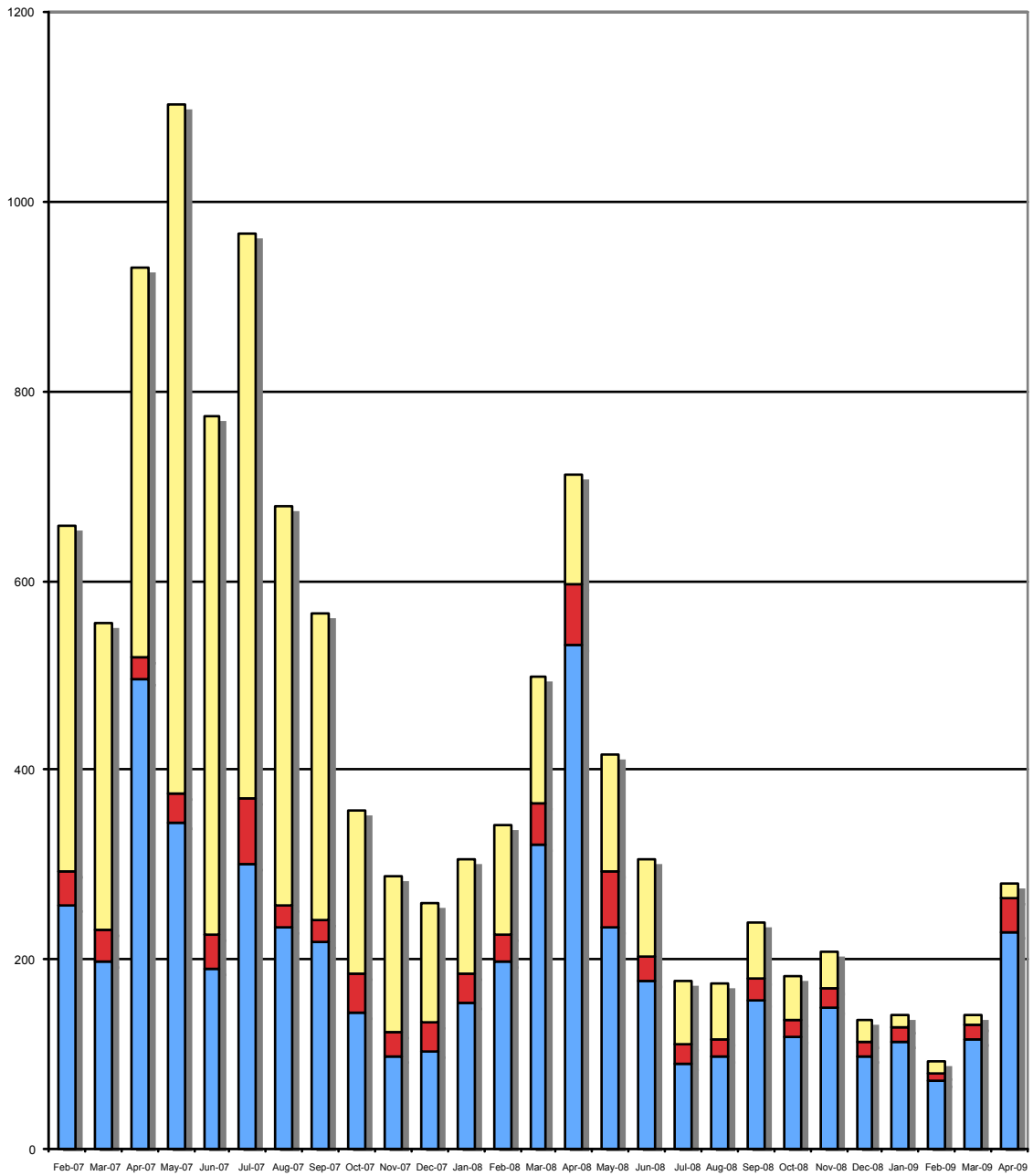
Figure 4: Iraqi Government Estimate of Patterns of Violence in Baghdad—2007 to 2009



	Feb-07	Mar-07	Apr-07	May-07	Jun-07	Jul-07	Aug-07	Sep-07	Oct-07	Nov-07	Dec-07	Jan-08	Feb-08	Mar-08	Apr-08	May-08	Jun-08	Jul-08	Aug-08	Sep-08	Oct-08	Nov-08	Dec-08	Jan-09	Feb-09	Mar-09	Apr-09	
■ RPG									1	4	1	1	7			1	13	5	1	5				2	1		1	
■ Hand Grenade																												6
■ Katyshua Rocks	2	1	1		3						9	16	23	15	32	21		1	2			2		3		10	3	
■ Mortar Landed	74	43	83	90	190	138	89	76	54	48	46	82	62	228	216	98	63	34	54	46	37	21	29	21	21	30	32	
■ Assassination	21	13	13	23	15	18			9	12	16	21	16	15	22	31	25	17	17	16	17	19	5		13	9	11	
■ Suicide Bomb		2	1		3						5	4	2	1	3	2	2	3	1	2	1	2	1	2		2	3	
■ Bicycle Bomb					1						1										2							
■ Car Bomb	23	19	38	35	20	35	15	24	20	15	16	6	13	13	13	13	11	6	7	15	5	7	5		4	3	13	
■ Magnetic IED																						28	9	5	5	17	9	
■ IED	65	33	82	63	133	96	84	63	78	73	71	103	77	131	118	107	96	94	92	113	98	80	54	64	71	48	49	

Source: An Iraqi government official and ABC News, May 1, 2009

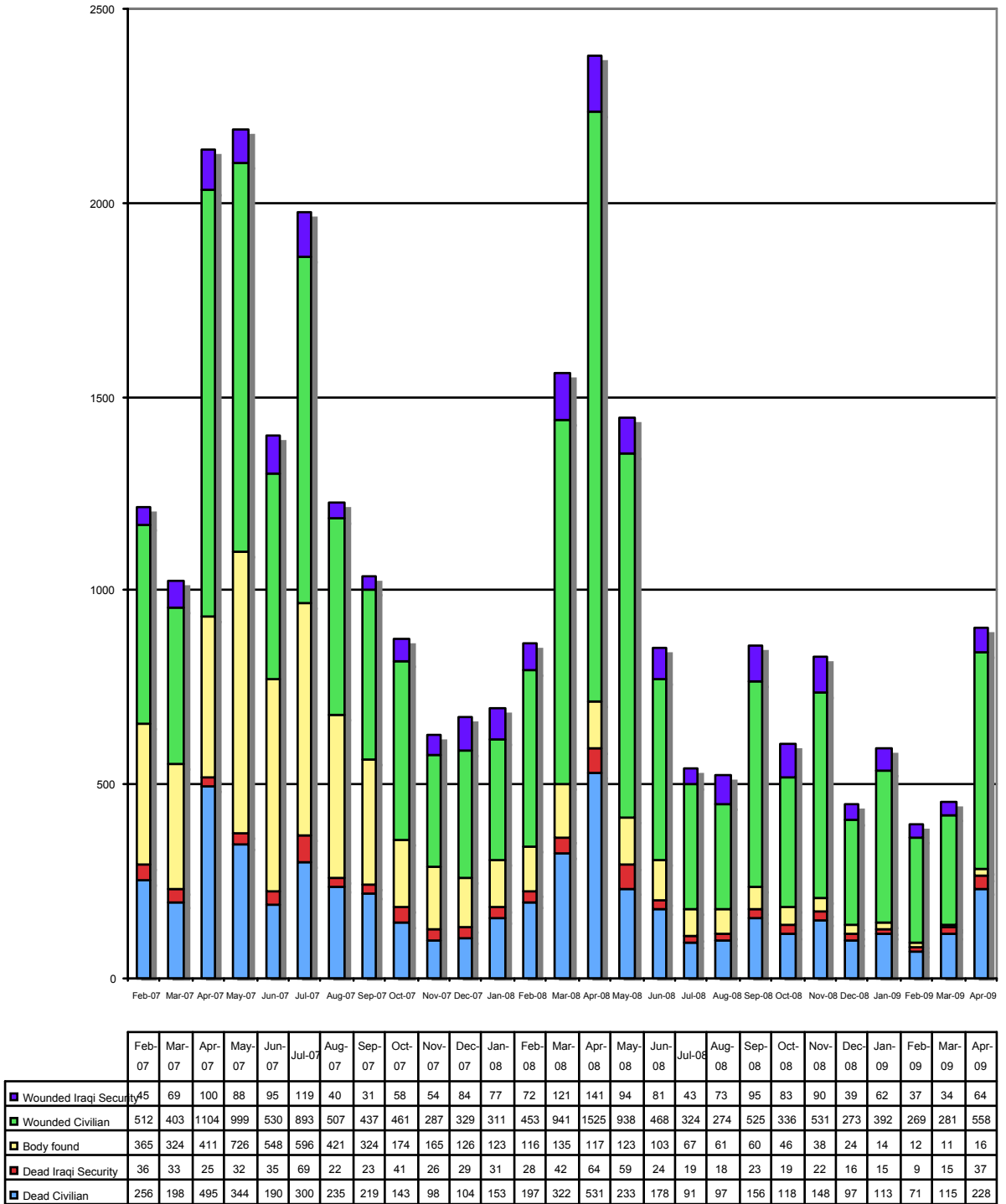
Figure 5: Iraqi Government Estimate of Killed in Baghdad—2007 to 2009



	Feb-07	Mar-07	Apr-07	May-07	Jun-07	Jul-07	Aug-07	Sep-07	Oct-07	Nov-07	Dec-07	Jan-08	Feb-08	Mar-08	Apr-08	May-08	Jun-08	Jul-08	Aug-08	Sep-08	Oct-08	Nov-08	Dec-08	Jan-09	Feb-09	Mar-09	Apr-09
Body found	365	324	411	726	548	596	421	324	174	165	126	123	116	135	117	123	103	67	61	60	46	38	24	14	12	11	16
Dead Iraqi Security Forces	36	33	25	32	35	69	22	23	41	26	29	31	28	42	64	59	24	19	18	23	19	22	16	15	9	15	37
Dead Civilian	256	198	495	344	190	300	235	219	143	98	104	153	197	322	531	233	178	91	97	156	118	148	97	113	71	115	228

Source: An Iraqi government official and ABC News, May 1, 2009

Figure 6: Iraqi Government Estimate of Killed, Wounded, and Bodies Found in Baghdad—2007 to 2009



Source: An Iraqi government official and ABC News, May 1, 2009