**Generation: War**

15 years in the shadow of ceaseless conflict

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The battle of peace has to be fought on two fronts. The first is the security where victory spells freedom from fear. The second is the economic and social front where victory means freedom from want. Only victory on both fronts can assure the world of an enduring peace (Edward Stettinius Jr., US Secretary of State, June 1945; cited in [1994 Human Development Report, p. 3)](http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/reports/255/hdr_1994_en_complete_nostats.pdf).

Sabhan al-Jawari was a 60-year-old farmer from Hawija. On January 19 2018 he was busy working on his land, and [then he was gunned down](http://www.thebaghdadpost.com/ar/story/79398/مسلحون-من-داعش-الإرهابي-يقتلون-مزارع-بالحويجة-والقوات-الأمنية-تشن-هجوما-لتطهير-المكان). Was he fearful as he worked? Did he think of his brothers who had been killed a few years previously? Sabhan was the third member of his family to be slain, one of ten civilians reported killed on that day, by gunfire and IEDs. The civilians slain on January 19 included a small child (killed in Ramadi); an engineer (killed in Mansuriya); a government employee (killed in Baquba); and a muezzin (killed in Baghdad). They were only some of the 474 unremarked-upon, little-noticed civilian deaths this January in Iraq.

Little-noticed, that is, at the safe distance from which most of the world regards the Iraq war, a war now removed not only geographically but increasingly distanced by the passage of time, fading both from sight and memory. But let us be clear: while the *invasion* of Iraq was 15 years ago, the post-invasion *war* in Iraq continues to this day. The intensity has [varied](https://www.iraqbodycount.org/database/) over those years, but even the war's quietest months have been punctuated by moments of mass horror, barely a day has passed without reports of civilians being shot or blown up, and despite any number of official declarations (soon proven false), there has been no ‘turning point’ towards peace, no ‘mission accomplished’ for ‘Operation Iraqi Freedom’.

So it is that, 15 years after the invasion, with military battles having recently wrested Falluja and Mosul from ISIS’ grip, and a democratically elected government in place, Iraqis still have good reason to be afraid. ISIS was not and is not the only threat to civilian lives in Iraq: were it to vanish entirely, violence against civilians would not vanish with it, although Iraq might at least be displaced from its position as [world capital of terrorism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Global_Terrorism_Index). (Of course ISIS has not completely vanished from Iraq, never mind any neighbouring country.)

Worrying examples of continuing armed violence in Iraq are many. Here are just two:

Kidnappings are increasing, along with all the family/community dread and anguish that each abduction involves. As reported by the [National Iraqi News Agency](http://ninanews.com/News_Details.aspx?Vi%2fOhQOqYIqKbCayN3C%2f2A%3d%3d) (Feb 1),

*Interior Minister Qassim al-Araji discussed with the governor of Diyala Muthana al-Tamimi the reasons for the increase in killings and kidnappings in the province. A statement by the Interior Ministry said that “Araji received in his office yesterday evening Diyala governor and discussed with him a number of topics related to the security of the province and the reasons for the increasing cases of killings and kidnappings recently.”*

And even as longstanding perpetrators of lawless violence are fought off, new ones emerge. For instance, [Al-Baghdadiya](http://albaghdadiyagroup.com/news/akhbar-iraq/raets-ootsh-tkshf-2dlt-gdedt-ladamat-gmaaet-nfztha-qoat-al2saesh-fe-neno) reported on February 9,

*Human Rights Watch revealed on Friday new evidence that Kurdish Asayish forces carried out mass executions of detainees from a militant organization, calling it a war crime. “There is new evidence that members of the al-Asayish branch in the west of the Tigris carried out mass executions against alleged al-Qa'ida militants in detention, which constitutes a war crime,” the organization said in a report, seen by al-Baghdadiya.*

*“The Peshmerga forces were holding the men, including Iraqis and foreigners, in a school in the village of Sahl al-Malahah, 70 kilometers north-west of Mosul, Neighboring Zammar, where they were executed. The evidence suggests that the Asayish forces collectively executed people suspected of belonging to Da'esh night after night for a week, meaning that they may have killed dozens or hundreds of male detainees,” said Middle East deputy director of Human Rights Watch, Lama Fakih.*

Personal loss, the desire for vengeance or retribution and numerous grievances mean that multiple killings continue, unlawful killings and executions as well as those sanctioned and carried out by the state. Neither kind interrupts the cycle of violence, instead drawing new participants into it. Other deeply felt grievances relate to ethnic or religious persecution; the literally as well as politically toxic residues of military occupation and foreign domination; economic disparity; political and judicial corruption.

State forces battle non state forces; insurgent groups battle each other; civilians are killed from all sides; militiamen try to intimidate and coerce populations; the ruling government is inept at making or maintaining peace and mired in endless war.

Just as freedom from fear remains perpetually over the horizon, so does freedom from want. Unsurprisingly, there is a rise in suicides in Iraq – ‘ordinary’ suicides, not the murderous, explosive kind that IBC records in its database (of which there has been the world-beating number of 1,700 since 2003, each killing on average 10 civilians). This latest trend and its prevalence among the young is noted with due alarm in Iraq, if not elsewhere: the [Baghdad Post](http://www.thebaghdadpost.com/ar/story/89507/انتحار-شاب-داخل-منزله-وسط-البصرة), reporting the suicide of a young man inside his home in Basra, notes on March 4, 2018:

*Not a day passes but new cases of suicide are recorded in various Iraqi provinces, in light of the difficult living conditions and high rates of poverty and unemployment, as a result of the failed government policies.*

The [SNG news agency](http://sngiq.net/wordpress/?p=115068), reporting on the suicide of a 23-year-old woman who threw herself into the river from a bridge in Hilla, highlights the trend's post-invasion context:

*It is noteworthy that a number of Iraqi cities have witnessed during the last period suicide cases attributed by psychiatrists to the psychological pressures and changes experienced by Iraqi society after the events of 2003.*

This young woman was 8 years old when her country was invaded, occupied, and transformed into a war zone. An entire generation of Iraqi children has known little other than life in a country riven by violence, fear, hopelessness, internal displacement and poverty.

And all around them, the war’s fearful legacy persists. The battle of Mosul may be over, but bodies are still being pulled from the rubble, the unavoidable and predictable outcome of the use of air- and ground-launched explosive weapons in populated areas ([#ewipa](https://twitter.com/search?q=%23EWIPA)):

*“The committee responsible for recovering the bodies from the areas of Ayman Mosul continues the work of searching and exhuming the bodies from the rubble of the houses destroyed as a result of the military operations during the restoration of the city,” a statement by the Ministry of Construction, Housing, Municipalities and Public Works said. “The remains of 2,140 civilians have been removed from the rubble of Ayman al-Mosul, west of the city, and the remains have been handed over to the forensic medicine in Mosul,” the statement said. (*[*Yaqein.net, Feb 05*](http://yaqein.net/politics/87188)*).*

According to [Al-Iraq News](http://www.al-iraqnews.com/news/newwss/security-news/220943-واع-مجلس-نينوى-نحو-1000-جثة-للمدنيين-لا-زالت-تحت-الأنقاض-بسب-القصف-الأميركي.html), as of 14 February there were still thought to be around around 1,000 bodies of civilians under the rubble in Mosul:

*“The old city on the right side is still replete with the bodies of the families, most of them children and women who were killed as a result of the American bombardment,” said a member of the council.*

The work of recovering bodies has now been left to civil defence volunteers. It may be many more months before all the dead are even nominally accounted for, and require much more effort before every casualty is [properly recorded](http://ref.ec/charter), whether from the Battle for Mosul or the wider war that preceded and now succeeds it.

During the first seven months of 2017 until the Battle of Mosul ended, ISIS was contained and coalition airstrikes ceased, the monthly civilian death toll recorded by IBC averaged 1,580; in the seven months thereafter, it averaged 430. This lower monthly figure resembles those of the least-violent post-invasion period, between 2009–2012. It was from this relative calm that ISIS burst bloodily into the scene, and those monthly figures climbed to higher totals than seen even during the worst months of the occupation. One can only hope that this is not a pattern that will repeat itself – and in any case 430 civilians killed is already 430 too many.

The world’s most steadfast witnesses to the violence are an [embattled Iraqi media](https://cpj.org/data/killed/mideast/iraq/?status=Killed&motiveConfirmed%5B%5D=Confirmed&type%5B%5D=Journalist&cc_fips%5B%5D=IZ&start_year=1992&end_year=2018&group_by=year) who have been reporting it daily: the shootings, the kidnappings, the airstrikes, the mass graves, the executions. They are the ones who ensure that whoever wants to follow security and other developments in Iraq is able to do so through their reporters, photographers, and the eyewitnesses and sources who confide in them.

And it is currently only the Iraqi media who provide any substantial amount of that consistent, incident-by-incident, person-by-person detail which humanises and respects each victim in his or her individuality, and brings the circumstances of their death into focus, even briefly. Iraq Body Count has, from its inception, striven to capture each such detail so it is not lost from the public record. The general public neglect of violent Iraqi civilian deaths makes us even more determined to continue our work.

In fact, Western publics seem to be becoming ever more inured and desensitised to Iraqi suffering, in part thanks to the creeping ‘normality’ of the relentless daily death toll. ‘Everyday’ violence makes poor news copy, especially when it’s happening far away and to no one we know. But we in the West have a responsibility to become more fully aware of the experienced realities of a nation and a people whose fates we have so significantly altered: blissful ignorance is not an option for us. After 15 years of never-ending bloodshed, is it not now finally time for our governments to join and support the efforts of Iraqi civil society and NGOs to accurately and comprehensively document the full extent of the harms suffered by the people of Iraq?

A generation in Iraq is growing up deprived of basic security or well grounded hope, a generation of the orphaned and dispossessed. Let us in the West have the courage to face this truth and accept the role we played in it, so that we may at last make meaningful efforts to help solve rather than compound these problems.