

Counting Casualties in Syria and Iraq: Process and Challenges

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Casualty estimates for the conflicts in Iraq and Syria are inconsistent and unreliable because of a range of methodological challenges in conducting and reporting counts. Estimates of the number of people who have died during Syria's civil conflict since March 2011 range from 250,000 to 470,000. In Iraq, the estimated range is between 19,000 and 41,650 deaths since January 2014. This product discusses the difficulties of collecting war-related casualty data in both countries and provides an overview of some of the current estimated figures available through selected organizations. CRS is unable to independently track casualties in Syria and Iraq, and cannot verify the data presented.

Methodological Challenges

War-related casualty numbers are generally not precise, particularly when a conflict is ongoing, when civilians and combatants may not be easily distinguished, and when insecurity limits access to large parts of the countries in question. The difficulties associated with counting war-related casualties in Syria and Iraq can be grouped into broad questions:

- **Who is collecting the data?** With limited access, most organizations counting casualties in Syria rely on an ad hoc network of activists on the ground to collect and corroborate information. For security reasons, groups do not release the identities of the sources whose information they use to populate a database of victims and generate a final fatalities count. Some groups release only their final fatalities total or their totals by category, disclosing neither the raw data nor its source.
- **Who is included in the death count?** Not all groups counting casualties in Syria include deaths of pro-government forces, and those that do vary by tens of thousands. Some death tallies appear to count only Syrian nationals, while others include foreign fighters. The Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR), which has the

highest fatalities [estimate](#), provides no breakdown of who is included. In Iraq, although the selected data collectors focus primarily on civilian deaths, the U.N. Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI) also reports on casualties of police and Iraqi Security Forces. The totals do not include American casualties.

- **How are deaths counted?** Most groups counting casualties in both countries arrive at their fatalities total by conducting a body count—attempting to verify the deaths of individual persons. SCPR's [report](#) does not explain its methodology for arriving at 470,000 deaths, other than noting that the number is based on survey methods. SCPR did explain that it divided Syria into roughly 700 regions, and asked three local experts in each region to estimate the death toll in their areas. The 470,000 number is the [sum of the average fatalities total](#) provided by unidentified local experts in each area.
- **What types of deaths are included?** For groups that do not provide raw data, it is unclear whether fatalities totals include indirect or non-combat deaths, such as those related to disease or food shortages.
- **How are the dead classified?** Groups have varying definitions for what constitutes a civilian, combatant, or noncombatant. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) has been [criticized](#) for listing deaths of rebel forces under the heading of civilian fatalities, although this would not alter the group's overall count.
- **How much reporting is circular?** U.N. estimates of casualties in Syria prior to 2014 were reportedly derived using [computer models](#) to process fatalities reports such as those from [SOHR and the Violations Documentation Center in Syria \(VDC\)](#). In Iraq, some groups have been collecting data on casualties since 2003. To the extent that groups use one another's information, errors in one data set may eventually be replicated in others.

Selected Data Collectors

Syria

The United Nations (U.N.) began tracking Syria fatalities in 2011 but stopped in January 2014, citing an inability to verify sources. Since then, the U.N. has intermittently released Syria death toll numbers, with few methodological details (see below). Other groups currently tracking casualties in Syria include:

[Syrian Observatory for Human Rights](#) (SOHR) was formed in 2006 and based in the UK. Reportedly, hundreds of volunteers in Syria investigate and report on fatalities. Articles reporting casualties ascribe deaths to particular parties, including Syrian government forces, foreign fighters, and opposition fighters.

[Violations Documentation Center in Syria](#) (VDC) is based in Damascus and headed by a human rights lawyer. According to the center, up to 30 activists document and verify casualty data.

[Syrian Center for Policy Research](#) (SCPR), based in Damascus, describes itself as a think tank. Its periodic publications report on Syria's economy and socioeconomic impacts of the crisis, using information from official institutions, U.N. agencies, and interviews with experts and informants.

[Syrian Network for Human Rights](#) (SNHR) relies on a network of volunteers in each governorate to compile lists of fatalities and verify victims' identities by photo or video and by speaking with family members, witnesses, and hospitals. SNHR reports fatalities by gender, age, perpetrator, and other classifications.

[Syrian Center for Statistics and Research](#) relies on a network of reporters who gather information and a team of researchers and academics within and outside of Syria who verify reports of persons killed, arrested, or missing. Local partners include human rights activists and the Association of Free Syrian Lawyers. Each documented case is identified by name, age, gender, place of death, and photos.

[Syrian Revolution Martyr Database](#) (SRMD) pulls data from the VDC and the Damascus Center for Human Rights, whose most recent information is from October 2015. The SRMD provides data to Syria Tracker.

[Syria Tracker](#) compiles data from eyewitnesses who submit reports online on human rights violations and casualties. Detailed information of the victims, including links to photos and videos, are included.

[United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs](#) (OCHA) and the [United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) (OHCHR) report numbers of civilian casualties but, with a few exceptions,

often do not provide a detailed explanation or methodology.

Iraq

Groups designed to track Iraqi civilian casualties have been operating since the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. In addition, one group tracks casualties in Iraq and Syria specifically related to Operation Inherent Resolve:

[The Iraq Body Count](#) (IBC) is administered by Conflict Casualties Monitor, a company registered in the UK. IBC compiles numbers of civilian deaths caused by violent means, regardless of perpetrator. Preliminary figures extracted from media reports are verified by records of hospitals, morgues, NGOs, or official reports. IBC data go back to January 2003.

[United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq](#) (UNAMI) was established in 2003 and analyzes reports of civilian casualties by reviewing testimony of victims, victims' relatives, witnesses, and evidence provided by health personnel, community leaders, government officials, NGOs, media reports, and other sources. Monthly summaries also report casualties of police and Iraqi Security Forces.

[Airwars.org](#) reports civilian casualties caused by airstrikes made by Russia and the U.S.-led coalition on Islamic State and other groups. Reporters and analysts based in London, Baghdad, and Lebanon examine reports by various governments, Islamic State, media, and social media.

Table 1. Comparison of Reported Fatalities

Organization	Latest Casualty Count	Period Covered	Note
Casualty Reports for Iraq			
Iraq Body Count	41,649 fatalities	January 2014 – April 4, 2016	Preliminary and verified numbers are differentiated in database.
United Nations	19,177 fatalities 35,231 injuries	January 2014 – March 2016	Monthly summaries explain figures; data gathered since 2008.
Casualty Reports for Syria			
Syrian Observatory for Human Rights	273,520 deaths: 79,585 civilians 2 million wounded	March 18, 2011 – March 15, 2016	Information is conveyed in periodic articles that identify various groups of casualties; the most recent was issued March 15, 2016 .
Violations Documentation	132,434 deaths	January 2011 – March 2016	The "Latest Martyrs" section identifies

[Center in Syria](#)

persons recently killed by name. Fatalities are identified by gender, age, combatant or civilian, and by governorate.

[Syrian Network for Human Rights](#)

194,208 deaths

March 2011 – March 2016

The website's front page posts cumulative statistics, while monthly and year end reports keep abreast of current conditions.

[United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights](#)

250,000 deaths

March 2011 – March 2016

Issued periodic summary estimates of Syrian deaths based on other group's reports; has stopped producing estimates due to concerns about the accuracy of source material.

[Airwars.org](#)

2,463 – 3,307+ civilian deaths in Iraq and Syria

August 8, 2014 – April 4, 2016

Counts civilian deaths in both Iraq and Syria caused by airstrikes reportedly aimed at Islamic State and other combatant groups.

[Syrian Center for Policy Research](#)

470,000 deaths

January 2011 – end of 2015

[Confronting Fragmentation](#) largely reports on economic issues; fatality figure is an extrapolation based on a 2014 population survey and is given without identifying who was included or excluded.

[Syrian Center for Statistics and Research](#)

127,040 fatalities
124,504 are civilian

March 2011 – April 2016

The [interactive statistical map](#) provides information by month, by governorate, or totaled. Names of persons killed, arrested, or missing are included.

[Syria Revolution
Martyr Database](#)

149,007 fatalities

as of February 29,
2016

"Martyr Counts" provide
statistical data on
deaths.

[Syria Tracker](#)

149,002 fatalities

March 18, 2011 –
February 29, 2016

Presents detailed
information about each
death, identifying
victims by name, age,
gender, governorate,
and how they were
killed.