

## APPENDIX F

### STATISTICS

Estimating casualties in the war presents a number of troubling problems. In the Iran-Iraq War, the two sides consistently manipulated loss figures to suit their purposes. At the same time, Western analysts accepted estimates that seemed wildly improbable. Almost without exception writers on the war have failed to deal rigorously with the issue of casualty estimates.

The problem can best be illustrated by looking at estimates of casualties in the first months of the war. As noted in the text, this was not a particularly active period—Iraqi commanders, under orders from Saddam, limited hostilities hoping to reduce casualties. Iran, too, was not eager to engage until it was fully mobilized. Despite the restraints on both sides, however, estimates of losses for this phase are on the heavy side, a figure of 20,000 wounded and killed Iraqis and Iranians, evenly distributed, is cited.<sup>1</sup>

When we expand the period under investigation, the conventionally assumed estimate becomes more problematical. Supposedly, up to 1983, some 245,000 perished on both sides (65,000 Iraqis, 180,000 Iranians).<sup>2</sup> To be sure, the additional period includes some quite fierce engagements; at the Battle of Bostan (November 1981) the Iranians had introduced the human wave attack. But Iraq reacted to Iran's escalation with discretion—it broke off contact and retreated to the border. Then, when Iran invaded Iraq in July 1982, the invasion failed, with heavy losses on the Iranian side. Afterwards Iraq kept the Iranians in check more or less handily. In other words, even including the expanded period (Spring 1981-December 1983), events do not seem to substantiate the high casualties claimed.

Nonetheless, as the war progressed, claims of high casualties continued. By April 1986, the death toll supposedly had reached 350,000—that is, 100,000 Iraqis dead, 250,000 Iranians.<sup>3</sup> And, by April 1988, casualties were estimated at between 450,000 to 730,000 Iranians dead, and 150,000 to 340,000 Iraqis.<sup>4</sup> Such losses are phenomenal, and put the Iran-Iraq War in a category with some of the bloodiest wars in history, including the American Civil War and World War I.

In all bloody wars, the carnage can be attributed to the style of fighting. In our own Civil War, for example, the penchant of troops to charge positions defended by increasingly more lethal weapons drove casualty figures upward. And indeed, the Iranians, like the Americans, were disposed to assault modern fire power. However, unlike soldiers of the Civil War, the Iranians did not fight without letup. Most Iranian-initiated activity occurred during the rainy season—between December and April. During this period Iran would make one, at most three attempts to break through Iraq's defenses around Basrah. Failing this, such attempts would usually subside, with little significant action for the remainder of the year. As long as the parties carried on the war in this disjointed manner, carnage of the order of the American Civil War could not have occurred.

Iraq was further limited demographically from sustaining truly high casualties—its pool of available manpower was too low. As stated in the report, Iraq was outnumbered by Iran three-to-one. But along with this, a large percentage of Iraq's population never served. Kurds, for example, refused to submit to the draft, a fact which the Iraqi leadership eventually accepted.<sup>5</sup> Kurds make up one fifth of Iraq's population, hence were a sizable minority to subtract from the manpower pool. Further, until 1986 Iraq made no attempt to draft its college students. Had Iraq been suffering heavy losses, as claimed, it could not have indulged itself in this way.

Finally there is the manner in which the war was carried out on the ground. Neither side ever penetrated deeply into the other's territory. Thus civilian populations were left relatively unscathed. There was, to be sure, the "war of the cities," in

which border communities were shelled by artillery and attacked by aircraft. But this was done on a more or less random basis. At no point was there ever a scorched earth policy pursued, as in Russia during World War II. Since devastation of civilian areas was limited, practically all casualties would have had to have been combatant. Given the profligate manner in which Iran treated its troops, it may be that its casualties were as high as claimed; but Iraq physically lacked the numbers to absorb the kinds of losses it is alleged to have suffered (not and stay in the war, anyway).

Clearly, further research on this issue is required. It is of considerable strategic importance, because it relates to Iraq's political will and capability to hold out in a war against American forces. We have been assuming that the Iraqi people, having suffered dreadfully in their last war, will not have the stomach for a further fight with us. If, as may be the case, their losses were not substantial, there may be more staying power than we imagine. In other words, they may not be as war-weary as we are making them out to be.