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## Fewer Iraqi Men: Dead or Undercounted?

UNITED NATIONS, Aug. 7 — An unusually high portion of Iraq's men seemingly disappeared between 1987 and 1997, newly released data from the most recent Iraqi census show.

The data, which Saddam Hussein sealed as a state secret, reveal previously unseen population scars left by years of war and repression.

In 1987 census takers recorded about 106 men for every 100 women; a decade later they found just under 99 men for every 100 women, a very big change in demographic terms.

Where did the men go? Or, looking at it another way, where did the women come from?

Demographers at the United Nations and the United States Census Bureau say that perhaps the men were casualties of war or Mr. Hussein's repression, or became exiles. Or perhaps the men simply made themselves scarce at census time.

It is also possible that the census counters in 1997, for the first time, were careful to count women, whom they may have undercounted in earlier years.

Joseph Chamie, the director of the United Nations population division, said he found that last explanation unlikely.

If the figures are accurate, he said, then the drop in the male-female ratio could well reflect a striking loss of men, who were either victims of violence or fled abroad to avoid it. But he cautioned against assuming such accuracy, saying, "All data are guilty until proven innocent."

The lowest reported male-female ratios were clustered in the southern third of the country, where Mr. Hussein persecuted the Shiite Muslims after their uprising in 1991.

In the district around Basra, the southernmost portion of the country, census takers found 97 men for every 100 women. In that province's rural areas, the home of the predominantly Shiite marsh Arabs who were a particular target of Mr. Hussein's wrath, there were 95 men for every 100 women, down from 103 in 1987.

Baghdad, with 5.4 million people, was the single most populous geographic area in 1997; the southwestern province of Muthanna was the least populous, with 437,000. In Baghdad the sex ratio still tilted toward men, with 101 men for every 100 women. Muthanna's ratio of 94 men for every 100 women was among the lowest.

Mr. Chamie said he suspected it might be that many of the missing men were not lost but in hiding, fearing they would be drafted or, if they were Kurds or Shiites, subjected to the indiscriminate vengeance of Mr. Hussein's government.

"There was the Iranian war," Mr. Chamie said, referring to the grinding conflict between Iraq and Iran that lasted from 1980 to 1988. "Then there was the gulf war."

"Then, after the gulf war in '91, there were conflicts in the south and in the north," he said, referring to the government crackdowns in the rebellious Shiite and Kurdish regions.

He added: "Now, several years later, someone comes knocking on the door and asks, 'How many males are here?' You're not going to get a lot of cooperation. There would be a lack of trust, especially if they thought they were going to be sent to the front in another gulf war."

Over all, the 1997 population count showed 22 million people in Iraq, including about 2.9 million in the three Kurdish provinces, where the population was estimated, not counted. International estimates put Iraq's total population at more than 25 million today.

The data now under scrutiny in Washington, New York, London and Amman are obviously dated. Iraq's census results were treated as state secrets by the Hussein government, some demographers here and at the United States Census Bureau in Suitland, Md., said this week.

But the new data provide the first outlines of a demographic portrait hidden from view until now.

The figures could be the basis of an electoral apportionment and so a building block of the democratic election promised to Iraqis by the provisional authority, said Col. Allen Irish, a United States Army officer working with the provisional authority in Baghdad.

"At this point we're still planning," he said in a telephone interview. "Ultimately it's going to be a decision made by the governing authority, whether that's the Governing Council or the coalition provisional authority or some interim group."

One of the problems with the 1997 data, he added, is that they include no information from the three northern provinces in the Kurdish region.

In the early days after the war, it looked as if there would be no data from anywhere.

The Ministry of Planning was bombed and then looted, Colonel Irish said. "The individual census records are pretty much destroyed, but the aggregated data survived. I remember being in the building and seeing what looked like census records strewn all over the floor and burned and pretty much trashed."

When no Iraqi census officials could be found, he said, "We ended up putting an announcement on the radio: show up at this spot at such and such a time." The officials then appeared and later brought the data they had preserved.

But more analysis is needed. Tom McDevitt, an international demographer with the United States Census Bureau said, "If you are working under the hypothesis that where the men went was they got killed either in the Iran-Iraq war or the gulf war or were just eliminated somewhere along the line, then you would expect to find the sex ratios in certain age groups" deviating from those of the overall population.

The new data on child mortality, of great interest to those who argued that United Nations sanctions were leaving Iraqi children underfed and without access to basic pharmaceuticals, are still being analyzed.

But, Mr. McDevitt said, "on a preliminary basis it looks like the child mortality may not have been quite as high during the mid- to late 1990's as has been thought on the limited information we've had from other sources."

The changes in Iraq, however striking, still fall far short of the cataclysmic changes in the post-World War II populations of Germany, France and Russia.

Germany had 85 men per 100 women in 1950; it had 96 in 2000. In 1950 Russia had 75 men per 100 women; it now has 88. In France the 1950 figure was 93; it is now 95.