

Original Article

Mortality of the Iranian Ex-Prisoners of War in Iraqi Detention Camps (1980 – 1990)

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Background: The present study aimed to determine the rate and cause of the mortality of the Iranian ex-prisoners of war in Iraqi detention camps during a ten- year period (1980 – 1990) according to the documented reports.

Methods: The information extracted from the documented death certifications that have been provided by the Iraqi authorities and the Red Cross delegation.

Results: At least a total of 564 Iranian prisoners of war died due to the various reasons in Iraqi detention camps that show a mortality rate of 1.4% (564/40,000). The mean captivity-to-death interval was 440 (from one to 3582) days and the registered prisoners had more duration of captivity than the unregistered (1285 vs. 215 days, $P= 0.001$). The median and mean ages of the individuals at the time of death were 22 and 26.4±13 years, respectively. The mean age of the civilians was higher than the others (45.3 vs. 23.7, $P=0.0001$). The cause of death was not clear for 44.3% of the individuals but among the others, infectious diseases (such as dysentery, sepsis, and meningitis) and injuries (resulting from war injuries and/or torture by Iraqi forces) were the main causes of death with 15.4% and 15.6%, respectively.

Conclusion: It seems that the mortality of the Iranian ex-prisoners of war in Iraq is more than previously reported. Therefore, more investigation is recommended to determine the exact number of the Iranian prisoners who died in Iraq.

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Introduction

In terms of the loss of disability adjusted life years, war was ranked 16th by the World Health Organization in the global burden of disease in 1990. By the year 2020 it is expected to rank in eighth place.¹ According to the previous reports, between 65 and 75 million individuals died in the World War II; meanwhile, wars and military conflicts have caused 41 million deaths between 1945 and 2000.² During the military conflicts an

undetectable number of military personnel are captured. They spend many years of their lives in captivity but there are limited reports about the mortality of the prisoners of wars (POWs) in detention camps.

In 1980, Saddam Hussein invaded Iranian territories and began a war that continued for eight years (22 September 1980 through 20 August 1988).³ According to the Iranian authorities, during the war, more than 40,000 Iranian soldiers were captured by Iraqi forces.⁴ Less than half of the prisoners were registered by delegations from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), but others (nearly 55%) went undetected until the exchange of the prisoners in August 1990.⁵ Their health conditions were poor in the detention camps and they were sometimes deprived of the most rudimentary medical supplies and facilities.⁶

The aim of the present study was to determine the rate and cause of mortality of the Iranian ex-prisoners of war (ex-POW) in Iraqi detention

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camps based on the documented reports during the ten-year period (1980 – 1990).

Materials and Methods

The Iranian forces that participated in the war were army (navy, air, and land forces), Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and volunteers. There were more than 20 detention camps for the former Iranian prisoners in Iraq: six camps in Ramadi (in the west of Iraq), four camps in Mosul (in the north of Iraq), 10 camps in Tikrit (located in the center of Iraq), and at least one camp in Baqubah. In addition, many unregistered Iranian prisoners were held in Abu Ghraib and al-Rashid in Baghdad (Figure 1).

In this study, the word “Registered prisoners” (R-prisoners) is used for detainees who were registered by ICRC delegations. “Unregistered prisoners” (UR-prisoners) used for detainees who were not registered and there was not any information about them until the great exchange of the prisoners in 1990.

Red Cross delegations delivered the death certificates of 574 Iranian POW in Iraq to the Iranian authorities. Ten individuals excluded from the study due to the lack of completed data, leaving 564 for further analysis. The documented information extracted from the death certificates of

the remaining 564 prisoners. The gathered information included demographic characteristics, date of captivity, place and date of death, captivity duration, and cause of death. The collected data were analyzed using SPSS software version 13.0 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, Illinois, USA) and a $P < 0.05$ was considered as the level of statistical significance.

Results

At least 564 Iranian POW died due to various causes in Iraqi detention camps that show a mortality rate of 1.4% (564/40,000). Among this group there was one female (0.2%) and 563 males (99.8%). The median and mean ages of the individuals at the time of captivity were 21 and 25 ± 11.7 years, respectively. The mean age of the civilians was significantly higher than the others (45.3 vs. 23.7, $P = 0.0001$). There were 121 (21.5%) registered and 443 (78.5%) unregistered detainees (Table 1). The UR- POW had a significantly higher mortality rate than the registered (odds ratio[OR]: 0.3; 95% CI=0.254 – 0.367). Volunteers (Basij) and soldiers (of Iranian army) comprised the majority of the Iranian ex-POW who died in Iraq with 34.4% (194/564) and 32.6% (184/564), respectively (Table 1). The kind of the soldiers' duty units is mentioned in Table 1. Thirty-five of

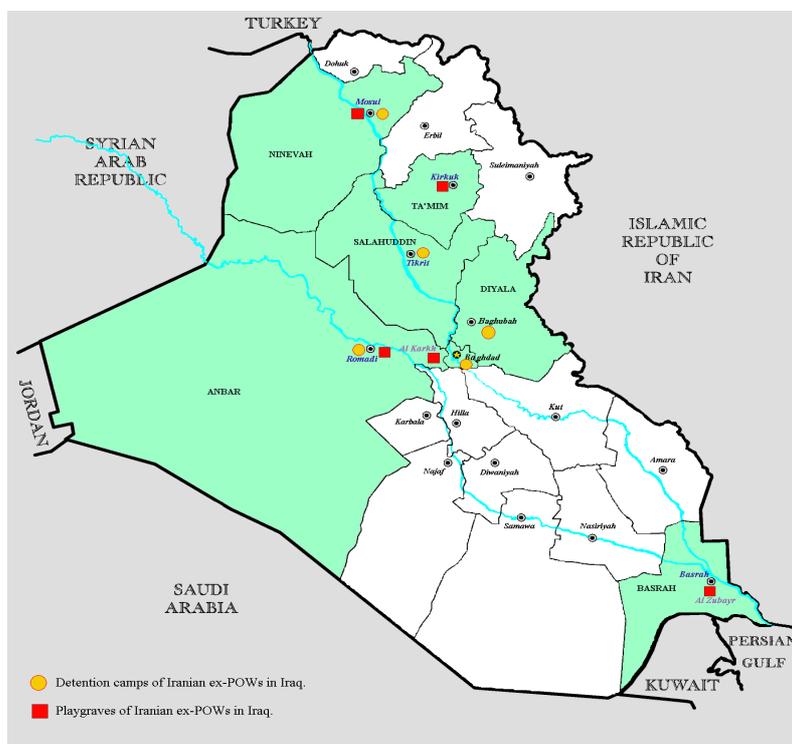


Figure 1. Place of detention camps and graveyards of the Iranian ex-POW in Iraq (1980 – 1990).POWs-POW

Table 1. Service branches of the Iranian prisoners of war died in Iraqi detention camps.

	Registered	Unregistered	Total
Army forces	32(13.9%)	199(86.1%)	231
Soldiers	16	168	
Sergeants	12	11	
Officers	4	20	
Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC)	4(7%)	53(93%)	57
Volunteers (Basij)	54(27.8%)	140(72.2%)	194
Civilians	31(88.6%)	4(11.4%)	35
Others*	0	47(100%)	47
	121(21.5%)	443(78.5%)	564

*Individuals who were not possible to be identified.

the Iranian ex-POW (6.2%) were civilians.

The cause of death was not clear for most of the individuals (44.3%). Among the others, infectious disease (such as dysentery, sepsis, and meningitis) was a prominent cause (15.6%) followed by injury (resulting from the war and/or torture by Iraqi forces) with 15.4 % (87/564) (Table 2). The median and mean ages of the prisoners at the time of death were 22 and 26.4±13 years, respectively. The mean captivity-to-death interval was 479 (one to 3582) days. R-prisoners had more duration of captivity than the unregistered (1285 vs. 215 days, $P=0.001$).

There were two increasing peaks of mortality for the Iranian ex-POW; first in the years of 1982 – 1984 and second in 1988 – 1989 (Figure 2). Grave's location of the Iranian ex-POW who died in Iraq is illustrated in Figure 1.

Discussion

Despite many severe wars in the 20th century with millions of deaths, there are limited reports of mortality among POW. In this study, we reported

the mortality rate and cause of documented deaths among the Iranian ex-POW in Iraqi camps during a ten-year period (1980 – 1990).

All but one of the Iranian ex-POW who died in Iraq were males. In Iran, according to the Islamic rules, only males could participate in the military operations. The sole woman who died in Iraqi camps was a civilian [the oldest ex-Iranian POW in Iraq] who was more than ninety years old at the time of the captivity. She died one year later. She had been captured in October 10, 1980 [18 days after the beginning of the war] and was registered by delegation of International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

Since young people comprise most of the persons who take part in military conflicts and similar to the other reports of POWs, the young adults comprised the majority of our cases. The results for the civilians were different; they had a significantly higher mean age than the military forces.

Skelton reported the mortality of American ex-POW in major conflicts that American forces entered in the 20th century.⁷ The mortality rate of

Table 2. Cause of death among the Iranian ex-POW in Iraq (1980 – 1990).

	Registered	Unregistered	Total
Infectious disease	11(9.1%)	77(17.4%)	86(15.6%)
Injury	16(13.2%)	71(16%)	87(15.4%)
Renal failure	5(4.1%)	25(5.6%)	30(5.3%)
Heat-stroke	2(1.6)	14(3.2%)	16(2.8%)
Internal bleeding	3(2.5%)	4(0.9%)	7(1.2%)
Fatigue	0(-)	12(2.7%)	12(2.1%)
Cancer	8(6.6%)	4(0.9%)	12(2.1%)
Stroke	4(3.3%)	0(-)	4(0.7%)
Heart attack	15(12.4%)	2(0.5%)	17(3%)
Suicide	5(4.1%)	0(-)	5(0.9%)
Homicide	1(0.8%)	0(-)	1(0.2%)
Elderly	1(0.8%)	0(-)	1(0.2%)
Others	14(11.6%)	20(4.5%)	34(6%)
Unspecified	36(29.9%)	214(48.3%)	250(44.3%)
	121	443	564

POW=prisoners of war.

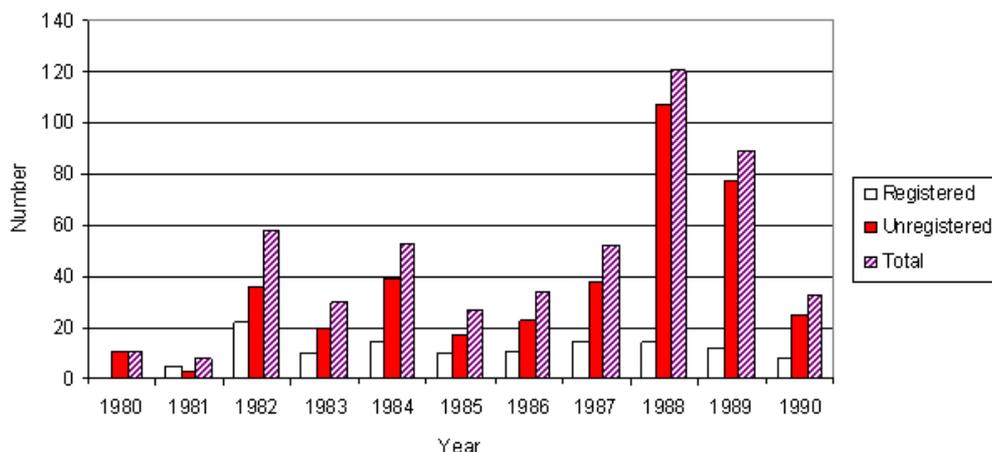


Figure 2. Frequency of deaths among Iranian ex-POWs in Iraqi detention camps (1980 – 1990).

American ex-POW in German camps in Europe during the World War II was 1.2%, but this rate for Pacific Theater of Operations was 40.4%. The mortality rate of American ex-POW in the Korean and Vietnam conflicts was 37% and 15.1%, respectively. Mortality of alliance in the World War I (1914 – 1918) has been reported by Spoerer.⁸ It was shown that Romanian ex-POW had the highest rate of deaths (17%). Out of the 5.7 million Soviet soldiers captured by The Axis powers between 1941 and 1945, 3.3 million prisoners (57.5% of the total captured) died during imprisonment.⁹

Following the occupation of Korea and China, during the World War II, a large number of civilian and military individuals who were captured by Japanese forces died.^{10,11} According to the report of the Tokyo tribunal, the death rate of Western prisoners in the Far East was 27.1% (American POW died at a rate of 37%), meanwhile the death rate of Chinese was more than the others.¹¹⁻¹³

Our study shows that 1.4% of the Iranian ex-POW died in Iraqi detention camps. This report is based on death certificates that delivered to Iran by ICIR but many signs denote that the mortality rate of the Iranian ex-POW is much higher than what documented by Iraq and ICIR. The number of the Iranian missing individuals during the Iraq-Iran war is not precisely known,³ but according to the unofficial reports, it is nearly more than 11,000 individuals. There is an opinion that a considerable proportion of them were POW and died in Iraq. The Iraqi TV had shown reports from the Iranian ex-POW whose captivity and their presence in Iraq were denied later. The prominent one is previous Iranian Oil Minister [Mr. Tondgouyan] who was captured on 31/10/ 1980 at Mahshar-Abadan road

[in south of Iran, near the Iran-Iraq border]. His interview was shown in Iraqi TV and his captivity was declared by Iraqi army announcement, but there was not any report from him until Iraq delivered his body to Iran in December 1991.¹⁴

As mentioned previously, our military forces that participated in the war consisted of three groups; army (officers, sergeants, and soldiers), IRGC, and volunteers.

Most of the prisoners who died in Iraqi detention camps were soldiers and/or volunteers. This reflects the Iranian forces that participated in the war. The majority of military operations in the war were in the ground; meanwhile, soldiers and volunteers comprised the backbone of our land forces.

Of the officers, 60.9% (14/24) were pilots of the war airplanes. All of them were unregistered and died mainly from injuries resulting from explosion of their planes or fired on them when they were ejected from their aircrafts. The highest unregistered rate among our cases was related to the IRGC forces. The Iraqi army had the worst behavior with the pilots and IRGC members, so most of them had the longest duration of captivity on unregistered situation.

Civilians comprised 6.2% of our cases. They were captured mainly in the first days of Iraq invasion of our territories when there were not enough forces in our borders for defending the individuals living in the villages and cities near the Iran-Iraq border.

Comparing the previous reports, our forces had the longest captivity.⁷ In Iraq-Iran war, ceasefire declared at August 20, 1988 but more than 95% of the prisoners repatriated to Iran mainly during one month in 1990 [August 17, 1990 – September 17,

1990]; so, the least duration of captivity of the Iranian ex-POW in Iraq was two years. For the prisoners who died in Iraq, the mean captivity-to-death interval was 479 days (~16 months).

Different reasons have been reported as the cause of death among POW in previous studies; starvation,^{7,12} infectious diseases,¹² hazards during transportation of prisoners to detention camps from battle zone,⁷ and slave labor (that was prevalent in Japan and Germany).⁸ In our study, infectious diseases and injuries were prominent causes. Injuries had two sources; clash trauma in battle zone before or at the time of captivity and tortures after captivity. Considering the cause of deaths, it is revealed that maltreatment of prisoners and the bad health statues in detention camps were the main reasons of death among the Iranian ex-POW in Iraq.

As is illustrated in Figure 2, the number of deaths among the Iranian ex-POW increased in the years 1982 and 1984. During these years, Iran achieved many great operations that resulted in the recapture of the majority of the Iranian occupied territories.

There is a prominent peak of mortality rate for our prisoners (mainly unregistered) in the final year of the war (1988 – 1989). At this year, Iraqi forces used widely the chemical gas to take the Majnoon Islands and Faw Peninsula. This led to captivity of 20,000 Iranian soldiers. Subsequently, the number of the Iranian ex-POW in Iraq became double. Before this time and during the war, the number of the Iraqi ex-POW in Iran was nearly twice as the Iranian prisoners in Iraq. This caused the Iraqi authorities not to allow Red Cross delegations to visit and register most of these prisoners. This situation increased the frequency of deaths among the unregistered Iranian ex-prisoners in Iraq. Our results show that our prisoners had more mortality because they had usually less facilities and support during their captivity. Totally, it seems that the presence of international organization over the detention camps could be effective to reduce the torture and difficulties of detainees.

Finally, further investigations are recommended to determine the deaths that have not been reported officially. This could reveal the destiny of many Iranian innocent individuals in Iraq-Iran war.

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