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CHIEF SCIENTIFIC ADVISER

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D News

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IRAQI CIVILIAN DEATHS: LANCET ARTICLE

1. Further to your discussion with CSA this morning, Professor Anderson has quickly reviewed the recent Lancet article on Iraqi civilian deaths.
2. CSA has concluded that the design of the study is robust, the methodology section is (unusually for the Lancet) long and detailed and that good quality statistical advice has been sought and applied in the presented analysis. He therefore believes that the paper is a sensible one, except perhaps for some of the language in the final paragraph, and that the results are probably as robust as one could have achieved in the very difficult circumstances. He therefore recommends that we should proceed with caution in publicly criticising the paper.
3. He would, however, add three caveats. First, the extrapolation from a very small sample size to the whole of Iraq is a weakness, especially given the rather small sample size (a total of 58 excess deaths) on which part of the extrapolation is based. Second, there are weaknesses in the way that deaths have been recorded. Attempts to get families to provide death certificates as evidence of death often met with a hostile response, so sub-sampling was adopted, further reducing the net sample of "confirmed" deaths. This means that in many cases the only evidence of a death having occurred, and of the cause of death, was the verbal information provided from (not necessarily disinterested) family members. And finally, as the penultimate paragraph of the paper notes, there were excess of deaths amongst males, possibly indicating that some of those who died were combatants rather than civilians.

[original signed]

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