

Costs of War

Executive Summary

History is replete with the stories of nations that have gone to war wildly underestimating what their campaigns will cost in lives and money. The war begun in 2001 in Afghanistan, which the United States soon expanded into Pakistan, and the invasion of Iraq in 2003, have been stark examples of this phenomenon. The Costs of War project – the joint effort of a team of 37 economists, anthropologists, political scientists, legal experts, human rights activists, and physicians – is an attempt to tally that cost and to ask for an official accounting where one cannot currently be made.

Those costs are counted in people killed, injured, and sickened as a result of the wars, and of people dislocated from their homes. Those people number in the millions, and include Americans, Afghans, Pakistanis, and Iraqis. The human costs include both past harms and harms that will only appear later or continue to reverberate for years to come in each of those countries, in addition to other countries the US has targeted or collaborated with in the War on Terror, such as Yemen, for example.

The costs of the wars are also financial. The project has begun to estimate those costs for the US. The costs are also found in changes in the social and political landscape of the US and the countries where the wars have been waged.

The scale of the impact, its ongoing nature, and the need for amelioration and prevention create a sharp need to understand what those wars' consequences are and will be.

Some of the project's main findings include the following:

- Our tally of all of the war's recorded dead — including armed forces on all sides, contractors, journalists, humanitarian workers, and civilians — shows that 370,000 people have died due to direct war violence.
- Indirect deaths from the wars, including those related to malnutrition, damaged health infrastructure, and environmental degradation must also be tallied. In previous wars, these deaths have far outnumbered deaths from combat. It is likely that many times more than 370,000 people have died indirectly in these wars.
- Approximately 210,000 civilians have been killed as a result of the fighting at the hands of all parties to the conflict, and more will die in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan as the violence continues. But most observers acknowledge that the number of civilians killed has been undercounted. The true number of civilian dead may be much larger when an adequate assessment is made.
- While we know how many US soldiers have died in the wars (over 6,800), what is startling is what we don't know about the levels of injury and illness in those who have returned from the wars. New disability claims continue to pour into the Department of Veterans Affairs, with 970,000 disability claims registered as of 31 March 2014. Many deaths and injuries among US contractors have not been reported as required by law, but it is likely that at least 6,900 have been killed.

- Millions of people have been displaced indefinitely and are living in grossly inadequate conditions. The number of Afghan, Iraqi, and Pakistani war refugees and internally displaced persons – 7.6 million – is equivalent to all of the people of Massachusetts and Delaware fleeing their homes.
- Iraq's infrastructure and health and education systems remain war-devastated.
- The armed conflict in Pakistan, which the US helps the Pakistani military fight by funding, equipping, and training them, is in many ways more intense than in Afghanistan although it receives less coverage in the US news.
- The US has made an estimated 76 drone strikes in Yemen, making the US arguably at war in that country.
- The wars have been accompanied by erosions in civil liberties at home and human rights violations abroad.
- The human and economic costs of these wars will continue for decades, some costs not peaking until mid-century.
- US government funding of reconstruction efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan have totaled over \$170 billion. Unfortunately, reconstruction is in significant part a misnomer as most of those funds have gone towards arming the military and police in both countries. Much of the money allocated to humanitarian relief and rebuilding civil society has been lost to fraud, waste, and abuse or to unsustainable projects.
- The US federal price tag for the Iraq war — including an estimate for veterans' medical and disability costs into the future — is about \$2.2 trillion dollars. The cost for both Iraq and Afghanistan/Pakistan is about \$4.4 trillion. Neither of these figures includes future interest costs on borrowing for the wars, which our report estimates at nearly \$8 trillion through 2054.
- Many of the wars' costs are invisible to Americans, buried in a variety of budgets, and so have not been counted or assessed. For example, while most people think the Pentagon war appropriations are equivalent to the wars' budgetary costs, the true numbers are twice that, and the full economic cost of the wars much larger yet.
- As with former US wars, the costs of paying for veterans' care into the future will be a sizable portion of the full costs of the war.
- The ripple effects on the US economy have also been significant, including job loss and interest rate increases. Those effects have been underappreciated.
- While US policymakers promised that the invasions would bring democracy to Afghanistan and Iraq, both countries continue to rank extremely low in global rankings of political freedom with warlords continuing to hold power in Afghanistan with US support, and Iraqi communities more segregated today than before by gender and ethnicity as a result of the war and ISIS able to take territory and lives in that context.
- Women in both countries are essentially closed out of political power and high rates of female unemployment and war widowhood have further eroded their condition.

- During the US troop withdrawal from Iraq, President Obama said that the US military was leaving behind a “sovereign, stable, and self-reliant Iraq.” This was not only an inaccurate account of Iraq’s situation at that time, but the country has since become less secure and politically stable.
- Serious and compelling alternatives to war were scarcely considered in the aftermath of 9/11 or in the discussion about war against Iraq. Some of those alternatives are still available to the US.

There are many costs of these wars that we have not yet been able to quantify and assess. Given limited resources, we focused on the human toll in the three major war zones and on US spending, as well as on assessing official US claims made for enhanced security, democracy, and women’s status and well being. There is still much more to know and understand about how all those affected by the wars have had their health, economies, and communities altered by the years of war, and about what solutions exist for the problems they face as a result of the wars’ destruction (updated to April 2015).