Fact Sheet: The True Costs of the Post-9/11 Wars

The Costs of War Project has created this resource drawn from our scholarly research as an overview of the true costs of U.S. post-9/11 wars. The “post-9/11 wars” refers to United States-led military operations and other government programs around the world that have grown out of President George W. Bush’s “Global War on Terror” and the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001.

The Budgetary Cost

Post-9/11 wars have been extremely costly. Through 2019, the U.S. federal government has spent or been obligated to spend $6.4 trillion on the post-9/11 wars.

These wars have largely been financed by borrowing. Unless the U.S. changes the way it pays for the post-9/11 wars, future interest will exceed $8 trillion by the 2050s.

The opportunity costs are staggering. Many of these funds could have been spent on public health or in sectors that create far more jobs than the defense sector, like education or green energy.
The Human Cost

The body count continues to grow. At least 801,000 people – including U.S. soldiers, allied security forces, civilians, and militants – have died due to war violence in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria (in the fight against the Islamic State), Yemen, and elsewhere.

U.S. service members represent fewer than 1 percent of direct war deaths. More than 7,000 of the total casualties are from U.S. service members. A plurality of those who have died as a direct result of the counterterror wars are civilians.

Many other people have died indirectly as a result of the wars. Because of war-related consequences including displacement and disease, many more people have died as a result of U.S. post-9/11 military activities.

The Environmental Cost

The Pentagon is the largest institutional consumer of fossil fuels in the world. It emits more greenhouse gases than whole countries, like Morocco and Switzerland. The post 9/11 wars are thus key contributors to climate change.
The Expanding Scope

The United States has post-9/11 military operations and programs run out of civilian departments for military purposes in at least 85 countries. Under the auspices of counterterrorism, U.S. operations stretch not only to Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, but also to Pakistan, the Philippines, Somalia, Mali, and many more countries than most Americans realize.

About Us

The Costs of War Project, housed at Brown University’s Watson Institute and Boston University’s Pardee Center, was launched by a group of scholars and experts to document the unacknowledged costs of the post-9/11 wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere. Please see www.costsofwar.org and don’t hesitate to reach out to us at costsofwar@brown.edu.