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New report documents unspeakable humanitarian and political toll

Even as the U.S. expands its military involvement in the Middle East and delays the troop drawdown from Afghanistan, the staggering human toll of the U.S. "war on terrorism" remains poorly understood.

A new [report](#) (PDF), whose release last month coincided with the 12th anniversary of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, attempts to draw attention to civilian and combatant casualties in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Yet the study, authored by the Nobel Peace Prize laureate International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War and other humanitarian groups, barely elicited a whisper in the media. Washington's preoccupation with the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and other regional conflicts has largely obscured the humanitarian, economic and political toll of its "war on terrorism."

But ISIL's resurgence is not unrelated to Washington's military campaign. "ISIL is a direct outgrowth of Al-Qaeda in Iraq that grew out of our invasion," [President Barack Obama](#) told Vice News last month. Until the U.S. comes to grips with the aftereffects of its counterterrorism policies, it will continue to pursue counterproductive strategies that cause incalculable damage.

The report estimates that at least 1.3 million people have been killed in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan from direct and indirect consequences of the U.S. "war on terrorism." One million people perished in Iraq alone, a shocking 5 percent of the country's population. The staggering civilian toll and the hostility it has engendered erodes the myth that the sprawling "war on terrorism" made the U.S. safer and upheld human rights, all at an acceptable cost.

As the authors point out, the report offers a conservative estimate. The death toll could exceed

2 million. Those killed in Yemen, Somalia and elsewhere from U.S. drone strikes were not included in the tally. Besides, the body count does not account for the wounded, the grieving and the dispossessed. There are [3 million internally displaced](#) Iraqis and nearly 2.5 million Afghan [refugees](#) living in Pakistan.

The U.S. tracks its own military deaths and physical injuries in Afghanistan and Iraq. (Its involvement in Pakistan has been more sporadic and secretive.) Unsurprisingly, there are no conclusive government statistics on casualties and deaths among enemy combatants and civilians. This omission is by design. In fact, authorities have sometimes [deliberately falsified details](#) about the carnage that the U.S. has wrought.

This isn't the first accounting on the suffering unleashed by U.S. counterterrorism efforts, but the American public remains woefully misinformed. A 2007 poll found that Americans estimated the Iraqi [death toll at 10,000](#). And it is not just the body count that has been obscured. A 2011 [study by the University of Maryland found](#) that 38 percent of Americans still believe that the U.S. uncovered clear evidence that Saddam Hussein was working closely with Al-Qaeda, though the claim is patently untrue.

The failure to reckon with past miscalculations bodes ill for avoiding the same mistakes in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, where Washington is providing logistical support for the Saudi-led intervention.

The U.S. has evinced shocking indifference to the suffering its policies have caused. The report admonishes policymakers and the public to avoid historical amnesia about the war's costs — a phenomenon not unique to the recent past. A flawed understanding of the toll of the Vietnam War persists. The death toll of 58,000 U.S. soldiers in Vietnam may be etched into our national consciousness, but those psychologically harmed from the war faded from view. And few can correctly cite the 2 million dead Vietnamese noncombatants, the lives lost and devastation from bombings in [Laos](#) and [Cambodia](#) or the war's enduring legacy of health and environmental harms caused by defoliants.

There are other haunting parallels as well. The Vietnam War had a destabilizing effect in the region that allowed the Khmer Rouge to thrive in Cambodia, where it committed genocide, for which there has been no real reckoning. It is all too easy to dismiss the fighting in the Middle East as ancient and inevitable internecine conflicts that are wholly independent of U.S. intervention. But that account precludes a reflective and critical assessment of how the region's disintegration unfolded.

The “war on terrorism” is not over in Afghanistan. In December the [U.N. Assistance Mission in Afghanistan](#) reported that 2014 saw the highest rate of civilian deaths and injuries in the five years the organization has kept statistics. After announcing plans to wind down U.S. involvement in Afghanistan, Obama recently [said nearly 10,000 U.S. soldiers](#) would remain in the country through the end of 2015. The use of [private military contractors](#), for which [statistics are intentionally vague](#), clouds the full scope of the U.S. presence there. Obama maintains that the target date for the final drawdown remains unchanged, but anti-war activists who hoped his election would herald the end of the George W. Bush–era aggression have reined in their relief.

The “war on terrorism” costs the U.S. not only blood but also treasure. [The Costs of War project at Brown University](#) estimated in June 2014 that the U.S. wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan would cost taxpayers “close to \$4.4 trillion, not including future interest costs on borrowing for the wars,” through the end of 2014. Last year 18 percent of the federal budget, or \$615 billion, went to defense spending. About [27 percent](#) of 2014 tax payments went directly to the military, and an [additional 18 percent](#) went toward paying for past military actions. Interest costs [will be at least \\$7.9 trillion by 2054](#) (PDF), unless Washington changes the way it pays its war debt.

Despite the costs and inefficacy of Washington’s military interventions, support for the use of force has grown: In three surveys by the Pew Research Center over the last decade, fewer than 40 percent of Americans believed in the use of force as the best strategy to combat terrorism, but recent [Pew poll](#) found that nearly half the Americans surveyed believed that military force is the best way to combat global terrorism.

The threat of terrorism [has not receded](#) in the wake of U.S. interventions. Sanitizing the effect of Washington’s past military campaigns leads to a flawed and inhumane cost-benefit analysis for future missions. And it provides political cover for leaders who should answer for the turmoil the U.S. has engendered. The failure to reckon with previous miscalculations bodes ill for avoiding the same mistakes in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, where Washington is providing logistical

support for the Saudi-led intervention. This will not only cause unspeakable human suffering beyond our borders but also may come back to haunt us once more.

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