

THE HUMAN AND ECONOMIC COSTS OF WAR

DEATHS, PHYSICAL INJURY AND DISPLACEMENT

The exact number of deaths resulting from the most recent wars in which Australians have fought will never be known, as most of the victims are civilians for whom reliable data are unavailable.

AFGHANISTAN

The Australian Government reports that systematic collection of data about Afghan civilian casualties did not begin until 2007. The United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA) documented that in the first 6 months of 2014, there were 1,564 civilian deaths, and 3,289 injuries, with the total of 4,853 civilian casualties being 24% higher than for the same period in 2013. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, said "Afghan civilians continue to pay the highest price in the conflict in Afghanistan."

The Costs of War project at the Watson Institute for International Studies at Brown University in the US estimates that, to February 2014, 21,000 civilians had died in the war in Afghanistan.

Australian forces have suffered 40 combat deaths, with 261 personnel being wounded, as a result of the Afghanistan war. For military forces, the ratio of wounded to dead is much higher than for civilians, because medical care for the wounded is generally far superior.

IRAQ

For Iraq, estimates of war deaths vary. The Iraq Body Count, which bases its data on published media reports, estimates the civilian deaths from violence since the 2003 invasion at 133,873 – 151,024 (website accessed 7 January, 2015). The Costs of War project estimates that more than 190,000 people (combatants and non-combatants) were killed in the first 10 years of the war.

In 2006, the medical journal *The Lancet* published a study estimating that the number of conflict-related deaths (combatants and non-combatants) to that time was 655,000, with 92% of them caused by direct violence.

Two Australians died from their service in Iraq.

DISPLACEMENT

Another of war's major human costs is in refugees. UNHCR's Global Trends 2013 report stated that by the end of that year, 51.2 million people had been forcibly displaced by persecution, conflict, generalised violence or human rights violations.

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Children await medical care in Iraq:
Photo by Sgt. Daniel West 2008

PSYCHOLOGICAL DAMAGE

Long-lasting and disabling psychological damage, including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), affects combatants and non-combatants, including Australian troops. The Middle East Area of Operations study of Australians who served in Afghanistan and/or Iraq between June 2010 and June 2012 found that, while most participants were psychologically fit following deployment, there were increased rates of anxiety, mood disorders, alcohol abuse and PTSD. There was a 19-fold increase in PTSD following deployment. Some argue that true rates of PTSD are much higher than official figures indicate (see for example B Wadham, *Tidal wave or trickle: treating returning veterans trauma*, The Conversation 18 August, 2013). In the US, the Veterans Administration estimated that in the year 2010 (but with data each year being fairly consistent), 22 veterans committed suicide every day. That's more than the number dying in combat.

The rate of mental health disorders in civilians living in current war zones is incalculable. In 2009, the Afghan Ministry of Public Health said that two-thirds of Afghans suffer mental health problems.

ECONOMIC COSTS

The Australian Strategic Policy Institute reports that since 1998, Australia has committed more than \$16.5 billion to military operations and overseas deployments. The total cost of sending Australian troops to the (2003 onwards) Iraq war was about \$2.5 billion. The total cost of operations in Afghanistan was \$9.3 billion. Australia's total military budget for 2014 – 2015 is \$29.3 billion.

For the US, the economic costs of the Iraq war are staggering. The Costs of War project estimated that its first 10 years would cost \$2.2 trillion, including substantial costs for veterans' care to 2053.

Economists Joseph E. Stiglitz and Linda J. Bilmes estimated in 2008 that the Iraq War would cost the US \$3 trillion, taking into account health and other costs for veterans. In 2010 they stated that that estimate was, if anything, too low, partly because the cost of diagnosing, treating and compensating disabled veterans proved higher than expected.

No official estimate has been made of the potential health costs in Australia of caring for Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans.

COMMENT

Other major costs of war, such as political, social and environmental, have not been addressed in this very brief summary.

One of the many unknowable features of military interventions is what would have occurred if the intervention had not taken place. Precisely because of the many uncertainties, and because of the magnitude of the human and other costs, it is essential that a decision to deploy troops is made only after the most rigorous and exhaustive scrutiny of all available options for dealing with situations of conflict. Australia's parliament should be a vital part of that process and not simply provide a rubber stamp for decisions made by a PM or the Executive. Governments should be required to explain to Parliament how they propose to meet all the predictable costs of military interventions.

Further references available on request.

FOR FURTHER COMMENT:

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