

Afghanistan and Iraq: America's Six Trillion Dollar Wars

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by Sabir Shah

The decade-long American wars in Afghanistan and Iraq would end up costing as much as \$6 trillion, the equivalent of \$75,000 for every American household, calculates the prestigious Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government.

Remember, when President George Bush's National Economic Council Director, Lawrence Lindsey, had told the country's largest newspaper "The Wall Street Journal" that the war would cost between \$100 billion and \$200 billion, he had found himself under intense fire from his colleagues in the administration who claimed that this was a gross overestimation.

Consequently, Lawrence Lindsey was forced to resign. It is also imperative to recall that the Bush administration had claimed at the very outset that the Iraq war would finance itself out of Iraqi oil revenues, but Washington DC had instead ended up borrowing some \$2 trillion to finance the two wars, the bulk of it from foreign lenders.

According to the Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government 2013 report, this accounted for roughly 20 per cent of the total amount added to the US national debt between 2001 and 2012.

According to the report, the US "has already paid \$260 billion in interest on the war debt," and future interest payments would amount to trillions of dollars. This Harvard University report has also been carried on its website by the Centre for Research on Globalisation, which is a widely-quoted Montreal-based independent research and media organisation.

In its report under review, the 377-year old Harvard University has viewed that these aforementioned wars had not only left the United States heavily indebted, but would also have a profound impact on the federal government's fiscal and budgetary crises over a protracted period.

The report has attributed the largest share of the trillions of dollars in continuing costs to care and compensation for hundreds of thousands of troops left physically and psychologically damaged by the two wars being discussed here.

The report states:

"The Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, taken together, will be the most expensive wars in US history—totaling somewhere between \$4 trillion and \$6 trillion. This includes long-term medical care and disability compensation for service

members, veterans and families, military replenishment and social and economic costs. The largest portion of that bill is yet to be paid.”

It asserts:

“Another major share of the long-term costs of the wars comes from paying off trillions of dollars in debt incurred as the US government failed to include their cost in annual budgets and simultaneously implemented sweeping tax cuts for the rich. In addition, huge expenditures are being made to replace military equipment used in the two wars. The report also cites improvements in military pay and benefits made in 2004 to counter declining recruitment rates as casualties rose in the Iraq war.”

The authors of this report have warned that the legacy of decisions taken during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars would dominate future federal budgets for decades to come.

According to the Harvard University report, some 1.56 million US troops—56 per cent of all Afghanistan and Iraq veterans—were receiving medical treatment at Veterans Administration facilities and would be granted benefits for the rest of their lives.

It reveals:

“One out of every two veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan has already applied for permanent disability benefits. The official figure of 50,000 American troops “wounded in action” vastly underestimates the real human costs of the two US wars. One-third of returning veterans are being diagnosed with mental health issues—suffering from anxiety, depression, and/or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).”

The report notes that in addition, over a quarter of a million troops have suffered traumatic brain injuries (TBI), which, in many cases, were combined with PTSD, posing greater problems in treatment and recovery.

“Constituting a particularly grim facet of this mental health crisis is the doubling of the suicide rate for US Army personnel, with many who attempted suicide suffering serious injuries,” opine the report authors.

It maintains:

“Overall, the Veterans Administration’s budget has more than doubled over the past decade, from \$61.4 billion in 2001 to \$140.3 billion in 2013. As a share of the total US budget it has grown from 2.5 percent to 3.5 percent over the same period. Soaring medical costs for veterans is attributable to several factors. Among them is that, thanks to advancements in medical technology and rapid treatment, soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan have survived wounds that would have cost their lives in earlier conflicts.”

The Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government report has estimated: “While the US government has already spent \$134 billion on medical care and disability benefits for Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, this figure will climb by an additional \$836 billion over the coming decades.”

It notes that the largest expenditures on health care for World War II veterans took place in the 1980s, roughly four decades after the war, and that spending on medical care and disability payments for Vietnam War veterans was still on the rise.

Here follows the description:

“The most common medical problems suffered by troops returning from the two wars include: diseases of the musculoskeletal system (principally joint and back disorders); mental health disorders; central nervous system and endocrine system disorders; as well as respiratory, digestive, skin and hearing disorders. Overall, some 29 per cent of these troops have been diagnosed with PTSD.”

The report goes on to argue: “Among the most severely wounded are 6,476 soldiers and Marines who have suffered “severe penetrating brain injury,” and another 1,715 who have had one or more limbs amputated. Over 30,000 veterans are listed as suffering 100 percent service-related disabilities, while another 145,000 are listed as 70 to 90 percent disabled.”

It reads: “The worst of these casualties have taken place under the Obama administration as a result of the so-called surge that the Democratic president ordered in Afghanistan.”

It mentions that the Walter Reed Medical Centre, US Army’s flagship hospital at Washington DC, was treating hundreds of recent amputees and severe casualties, adding that this facility had received 100 amputees for treatment during 2010; 170 amputees in 2011; and 107 amputees in 2012.

The report has also stated that the US Marines have suffered an especially high toll.

The report points out: “Massive direct spending on the two imperialist interventions continues. With over 60,000 US troops remain in Afghanistan, it is estimated that the cost of deploying one American soldier for one year in this war amounts to \$1 million. These troops continue suffering casualties—including in so-called “green on blue” attacks by Afghan security forces on their ostensible allies. As they are brought home, they will further drive up the costs of medical care and disability compensation. The US is maintaining a vast diplomatic presence in Iraq, including at least 10,000 private contractors providing support in security, IT, logistics, engineering and other occupations; as well as logistics support and payments for leased facilities in Kuwait.”

In its conclusion, the report not only seeks to dispel illusions that ending full-scale wars in Iraq and Afghanistan would produce any kind of “peace dividend” that could help ameliorate conditions of poverty, unemployment and declining living standards for working people in the US itself, but makes it clear that the legacy of decisions made during the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts would impose significant long-term costs on the federal government for many years to come.

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