

Comprehensive Estimation of High Costs of War and Conflicts Needed

By [Bharat Dogra](#)

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Theme: [Intelligence](#)

There is increasing need for more comprehensive estimation of costs of conflicts and wars. It is expected that wider realization of very high costs of war can contribute much to more emphasis being placed on reducing the possibilities of wars and conflicts and for overall enhancement of peace prospects all over the world.

Generally the most widespread single indicator of costs of war that has been commonly used refers to the number of people who die in a war or conflict directly due to the violence of the conflict including shooting, bomb-blasts etc. However it is increasingly realized that wars also increase the possibilities of hunger, displacement, homelessness, collapse of water and sanitation facilities as well as other essential infrastructure, denial of medical care, spread of disease, mental stress and suicides. All this also results in a large number of deaths.

While deaths caused by violence like shooting and bombs is referred to as deaths caused directly by war, the other deaths are referred to as deaths caused indirectly by wars and conflicts. The indirectly caused deaths can be very high in the context of civil wars. However even in other wars these have been found to be generally much higher than directly caused deaths.

This concept of indirectly caused deaths received a lot of attention in Iraq where a very large number of deaths of children were reported due to indirect causes. Another factor that was highlighted here was that use of depleted uranium weapons leaves behind high risks of very serious diseases like cancer and this continues to cause high levels of distress many years or even decades after the actual fighting has stopped. In other conflicts the use of landmines (example Angola), cluster bombs (as in Laos) and chemical warfare and herbicides (as in Vietnam) have left behind very long-term destructive impacts (not to mention the widely known and most horrible long-term impacts of atom bombs suffered in the two Japanese locations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki).

More recently it is the comprehensive estimates prepared by Brown University regarding the costs of the USA's War on Terror which have drawn a lot of attention to the concept of indirect costs. In these estimates during the roughly two decades of the War of Terror 2001-21 it was estimated that 0.9 million or nine lakh people were directly killed. However the estimates of indirect deaths were nearly four times of this. If you add directly and indirectly caused deaths then as many as 4.5 million deaths were caused, mostly in countries like Iraq, Afghanistan etc. but each and every affected country was not covered.



A view of Palestinians as they try to continue their daily life amid Israeli attacks at the Jabalia Refugee Camp in Jabalia, Gaz on February 17, 2024 [Dawoud Abo Alkas - Anadolu Agency]

In the case of the ongoing Gaza conflict somewhat similar assumptions have been used to find out the number of indirectly caused deaths. In Gaza the latest estimate is that nearly 38,000 people have died directly in the violence. However this does not include those people who were buried under the rubble of destroyed buildings and hence could not be identified or counted. Roughly their number has been estimated to be about 10,000.

If these numbers are counted then the number increases to about 48,000 directly caused deaths by violence. However if it is assumed that four indirect deaths are caused per directly caused death, as in the case of Brown University's estimates for the War on Terror, then the number of indirectly caused deaths is about 192,000 and the number of total deaths in the Gaza conflict up to July 14, 2024 is about 240,000. This amounts to about 10 per cent of the entire population which is a very high estimate for a very small region like Gaza within a period of about just nine months of conflict. The reason for this is that living conditions of Gaza have been ruined on such a colossal scale by relentless bombing that survival is indeed becoming very difficult.

In fact indirectly caused deaths can easily be an even higher multiple of directly caused deaths in several conflicts. Various estimates indicate that these can range from three times to even higher than ten times. Chances of these higher estimates are higher in conflict zones like Gaza where living conditions have been so badly destroyed that most essential infrastructure has collapsed.

The indirect and even direct deaths have been even more difficult to estimate for the Ukraine conflict as very different statistics have been emerging from various sources. Still as the number of directly caused deaths is at least 200,000 (likely to be more) and as there has been massive destruction of basic living conditions over vast areas what we can

conservatively estimate is that indirectly caused deaths here too are a multiple of four or about 800,000 and hence the overall mortality of this conflict has crossed about one million.

In addition we must not forget the large number of people, soldiers as well as civilians, who are very seriously injured or disabled in wars and have to live with these injuries and disabilities for a long time.

These are only some important aspects of a more comprehensive evaluation of wars and conflicts. This must be seen together with the increased possibilities of conflicts and wars in recent times. We can obtain an idea of this increasing threat of conflicts from the latest (2024) report of the Global Peace Index.

The Global Peace Index (GPI) ranks 163 independent states and territories according to their level of peacefulness, covering 99.7 per cent of the world's population. Produced by the Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP), the GPI has been frequently mentioned as the world's leading measure of global war and peace.

One of the most significant findings of this report is that many of the conditions that precede major conflicts are higher now than they have been since the end of the Second World War. In addition the number of conflicts are also increasing in various parts of the world. As the GPI tells us, there are currently 56 active conflicts, the most since the end of Second World War, and with fewer conflicts being resolved, either militarily or through peace agreements.

The GPI tells us further that the number of conflicts that ended in a decisive victory fell from 49 per cent in the 1970s to nine per cent in the 2010s, while conflicts that ended through peace agreements fell from 23 per cent to four per cent over the same period.

The latest GPI also tells us that conflicts are also becoming more internationalised, with as many as 92 countries now engaged in a conflict beyond their borders, the most since the inception of the GPI in 2008, complicating negotiation processes for a lasting peace and prolonging conflicts. Trying to explain this worrying phenomenon, the GPI argues that

the “internationalisation of conflict is driven by increased great power competition and the rise of middle level powers, who are becoming more active in their regions.”

Further GPI 2024 tells us that although the measures of militarisation had been improving for the first 16 years of the GPI, the trend has now reversed and in 2024 militarisation deteriorated in 108 countries.

The combination of these factors, GPI argues, means that the likelihood of another major conflict is higher than at any time since the inception of the GPI. According to the GPI, this year's results found that the average level of global peacefulness deteriorated by 0.56 per cent. This is the 12th deterioration in peacefulness in the last 16 years, with 65 countries improving and 97 deteriorating in peacefulness. This is the highest number of countries to deteriorate in peacefulness in a single year since the inception of the index.

Thus not only are comprehensively estimated costs of wars and conflicts much higher than is commonly realized, in addition the possibilities of wars and conflicts, including much bigger wars and more prolonged conflicts, have been increasing in recent times. Hence clearly we are living in very high risk times and there is a very strong case for strengthening of the forces of peace at all levels. The ability of the UNO as a force of peace must increase

with overdue reforms. The forces of peace should work with much greater continuity instead of becoming active only as fire-fighting forces. There must be much greater unity among them, and closer links with forces of environment protection and justice.

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***Bharat Dogra** is Honorary Convener, Campaign to Save Earth Now. His recent books include *Protecting Earth for Children, A Day in 2071* and *Planet in Peril*. More information and photo if required can be seen at his web-site bharatdogra.in. He is a regular contributor to Global Research.*

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