

# The 'War on Terror' Forced 37 Million People to Flee Their Homes

When President George W. Bush launched the "War on Terror" in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, few could have predicted the campaign would entail U.S. involvement in combat in [24 countries](#) over the next two decades. But it did, and the resulting conflicts have come at enormous costs we are only now beginning to fully realize.

From the Iraq War to the 19-year (and counting) military intervention in Afghanistan, the U.S. has spent trillions of dollars and [lost thousands of American lives](#) in protracted military engagements. We know that, across all sides, an astounding [800,000 civilians and combatants](#) have died in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Pakistan, and Yemen since the U.S. got involved. But we are only now beginning to understand the full ramifications of our many interventions around the world – and just how many millions of peoples' lives were disrupted or destroyed by these conflicts.

A [new report](#) from Brown University's Cost of War Project finds that the War on Terror has led to the displacement of at least 37 million people, meaning that this many people were forced to flee their homes and leave their lives behind. This includes 8 million people who fled across country borders as refugees or asylum seekers and at least 29 million people who were internally displaced within their home country. The report finds that roughly 25 million have since returned home.

It is important to note that the report does not conclude that all of these displacements are the fault of the United States. There are many factors at play and many parties involved in these conflicts. However, it is indisputable that, from Iraq

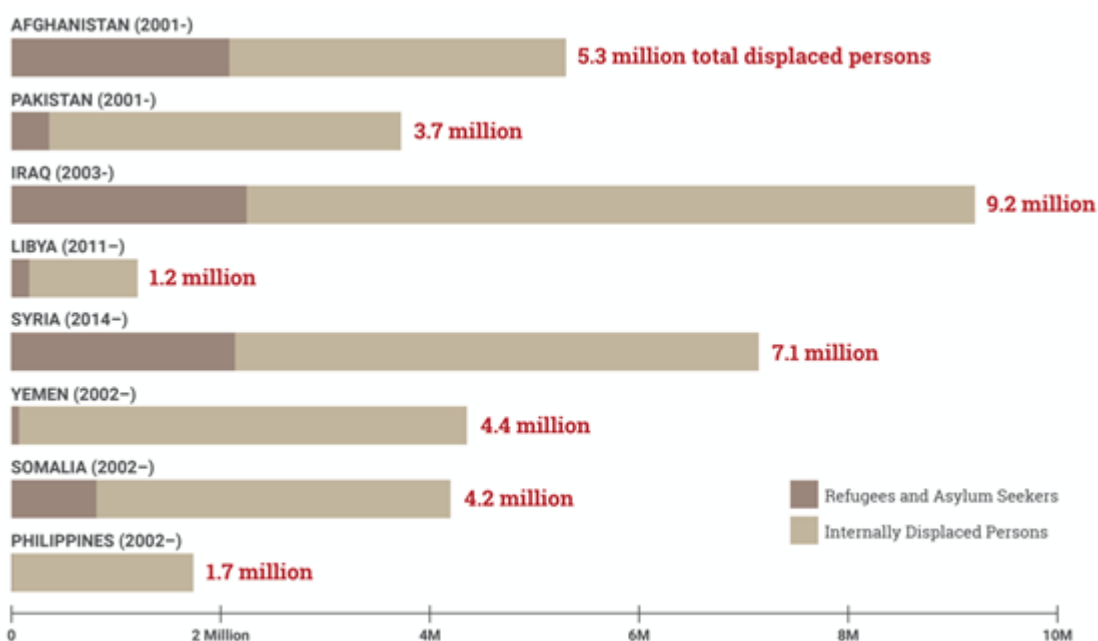
to Afghanistan to Libya, U.S. military intervention has greatly contributed to the chaos and instability that resulted in so many people fleeing their homes.

The human, economic, and social costs here are difficult to overstate.

“Millions have fled air strikes, bombings, artillery fire, drone attacks, gun battles, and rape. People have fled the destruction of their homes, neighborhoods, hospitals, schools, jobs, and local food and water sources,” the study’s authors [write](#). “They have escaped forced evictions, death threats, and large-scale ethnic cleansing set off by the U.S wars in Afghanistan and Iraq in particular.”

To put the number of people displaced by the War on Terror into context, the entire population of Canada is only [38 million](#). That’s right: The number of people the War on Terror has sent fleeing their homes could nearly repopulate Canada.

The below graph shows the country-by-country breakdown for this war-induced migration.



Key source: David Vine, Cala Coffman, Katalina Khoury, Madison Lovasz, Helen Bush, Rachel Leduc, and Jennifer Walkup. "Creating Refugees: Displacement Caused by the U.S. Post-9/11 Wars," Costs of War Project, Brown University, Sept. 8, 2020.

Map and graphics by Kelly Martin/IRW

Image Credit: Brown University’s Cost of War Project

And all of this may be an underestimate. The study's authors used a conservative methodology to come to their conclusions, and they say the true figure could be as high as 59 million people displaced.

Yet the costs of war go far beyond the causality statistics. War has ripple effects, and measuring the total human cost and pain involved in armed conflict is essentially impossible. But knowing roughly how many displaced peoples' lives were turned upside down in the War on Terror is an important place to start. It's a reminder of just how heavily the costs end up outweighing the benefits when we rush to drastic decisions amid crisis.

Time and time again, we have seen politicians seize on a crisis while the public's emotions run high and launch a massive government intervention, be it into another country or into the market economy, in the heat of the moment. Yet in hindsight these threats usually turn out to be far less grave than they had seemed in the moment, while the costs end up far exceeding what anyone expected.

This heavy-handed and reactionary approach inherently and inevitably entails the displacement of innocent people.

"For the past 14 years, the American Colossus has been on a Godzilla-like rampage, trampling over the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia: squashing people, flattening homes, and demolishing communities," Dan Sanchez [wrote](#) in summation of this pattern in 2015. "Now its specialty is not offering refuge, but making refugees. Not welcoming huddled masses, but mass-producing them. The Iraq War displaced millions. The chaos it engendered, including the rise of ISIS (which didn't even exist before the war) displaced millions more."

And it's important to note that despite these enormous costs and consequences, the U.S.'s military interventions have largely failed to achieve the intended results. In many cases, we've actually made things much worse.

For example, the U.S. originally intervened in Afghanistan in 2001 to punish the Taliban for harboring the terrorists who planned the 9/11 attacks. This justified goal was accomplished within a few years. The decade and a half since of U.S. investment and American lives have been spent on a failed regime change experiment trying to prop up an Afghanistan government that would, all these years later, still collapse in short order without U.S. backing.

In Iraq, the terrorist group ISIS only emerged as a result of the chaos, instability, and ensuing power vacuum the U.S. [created with its sweeping intervention](#).

And in Libya, perhaps the most glaring example, the U.S. launched a military intervention to depose the regime of dictator Muammar el-Qaddafi, hoping to start a new era for the country. Instead [we turned it into a literal failed state](#).

Defenders of the status quo are left with the impossible mission of justifying vast destruction, death, and displacement, with only a litany of failures to show for it.

"The displacement and other suffering must be central to any analysis of the post-9/11 wars and to any conceivable consideration of the future use of military force by the United States or any other country," the Brown University [report concluded](#). "The legitimacy and efficacy of war should be questioned more than ever given nearly two decades of disastrous outcomes."

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