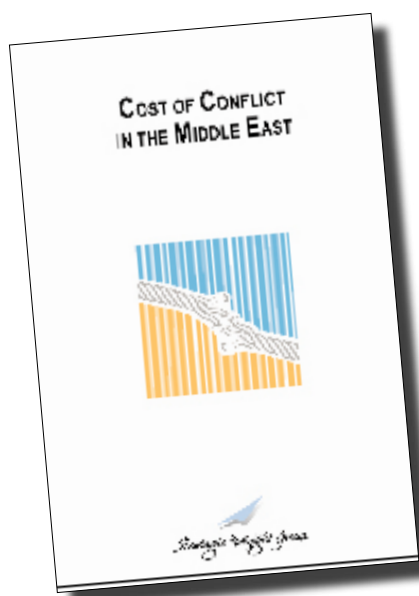


# THE REAL COST OF WAR

*WEST ASIA IS* an exceptionally conflict-ridden zone. Each war there has yielded a plethora of cost estimates; at times wildly different from one another, at others deeply disturbing.

BY **GULSHAN DIETL**



**Sundeep Waslekar  
and Ilmas Futehally**

Cost of Conflict in the  
Middle East  
Strategic Foresight  
Group, Mumbai  
(2009)  
Pp. 173, Rs. 1,800  
(Abroad U.S. \$40)

The Strategic Foresight Group (SFG), a Mumbai-based think tank, has made in-depth studies of the cost of India-Pakistan and Sri Lanka conflicts earlier. This is the third study looking at the cost of conflict in West Asia. The size of the canvas and the intricate lines on it make this study much more challenging — and yet that much more worth doing.

Sundeep Waslekar and Ilmas Futehally have co-authored the study, while Egemen Bagis from Turkey, Thomas Greminger from Switzerland, Vidar Helgesen from Norway, Salman Shaikh from Qatar and Hesham Yousef from the Arab League have constituted the core group. Two international conferences held in Turkey and Switzerland last year also provided inputs for the study.

In addition, the SFG brought together an array of scholars and activists from Palestine, Egypt, Lebanon, Turkey, Qatar, Jordan, Israel, Switzerland and Norway to contribute to the study. The ruling Justice and Development Party or White Party (AKP party) in Turkey, the Swiss Foreign Ministry, the Norwegian Foreign Ministry and the Qatar Foundation have been listed as major supporters of the project. In short, it is an ambitious undertaking.

The 'cost of conflict methodology' or the 'cost of conflict approach' has been explained in the report to include economic, military, environmental, social and political costs. It differentiates between costs to the people and states engaged in a conflict as well as to the international community. It contrasts these costs with the benefits that may derive from peace. The approach considers direct costs of conflict (for instance, human deaths, military expenditure, economic losses and the destruction of physical infrastructure) as well as indirect costs that may measure the impact of conflict on a society (for instance, costs of migration, humiliation, growth of extremism and lack of civil society).



BLOWN TO BITS: A Palestinian stands on the rubble of the bombed headquarters of the National Guard in Gaza city

PHOTO: PATRICK BAZI / AFP

West Asia is an exceptionally conflict-ridden area. Every war there has yielded a plethora of cost estimates; at times wildly different from one another, at others deeply disturbing. Take for example the Iran-Iraq war that lasted from 1980 to 1988. The widely quoted figures of one million dead and \$1 trillion lost have acquired a general acceptance; even as the warring states have proffered much lower figures on both counts.

The cost analyses of the U.S. war on Iraq in 1991 reveal that it cost the Americans absolutely nothing. The Kuwaitis, the Saudis, the Germans and the Japanese were the main financiers of the war. Washington either broke

even or saved out of its contributions! Iraq, on the other hand, was bombed to the Stone Age during the relentless air assault that went on for 34 days. In terms of human cost, 148 Americans, 47 British, two French and 14 Egyptian soldiers lost their lives. On the other hand, 60,000 Iraqis perished during the short war. If the post-war violence in the north and south of Iraq is added to the casualties, the figure is estimated to reach 205,000 dead.

The U.S. war on Iraq in 2003 has been the subject of harsh scrutiny in terms of the death and destruction it is continuing to cause to date. Josef Stiglitz and Linda Bilmes (*The Three Trillion Dollar War*, Allen Lane, London, 2008)



PHOTO: AHMAD AL-RUBAYE / AFP

REMAINS OF THE DAY: Fourteen years after the end of the Iran-Iraq war, remains of slain soldiers being exchanged at the Al-Fakka border

have put the figure of \$3 trillion on the war. The amount refers to the cost incurred by the Americans alone; and the authors are now insisting that it needs an upward revision!

The SFG study has made 'some estimates using 1991 as the basis and another set of calculations using 2010 as the basis' (Preface). From the very beginning, therefore, there is a lack of clarity as to how one reads and interprets the data. It puts the figure of \$12 trillion as the total opportunity cost and divides it among the major actors in the conflicts. Considering the number of conflicts that have happened and are still going on and considering the states and people affected by them, the true figure may be much higher.

The study envisages the worst-case scenario of a nuclear Armageddon in 2017. Israel, by then, would have retained its arsenal of more than 200 atomic weapons; Iran would have acquired 20, the Saudis four or five. Israel would use Jericho 3 as its delivery system, Iran the Shehab 4 and the Saudis the Dong Feng. The end result of the confrontation would be 50 million dead, disastrous physical and psychological problems, economies suffering due to total collapse of infrastructure, capital flights, collapse

of financial system and fires spreading from the oil wells. It would spell the end of the world as we know it, leading either to a World War or reordering of global priorities.

At the other end of the spectrum, the report offers micro-economic indicators in case of the continuing conventional conflicts: ports damaged, ships sunk, salt water intrusion in the coastal aquifers, declining quality of arable land, museums and libraries looted, time wasted due to Israeli checkpoints, and so on.

The report then moves on to present four alternative scenarios for the year 2025. The first one, 'Where Suspicion Prevails' has the Israel-Palestine issue resolved on the basis of a two-state solution and the international community keeps pressure on all sides for the situation not to slide into a war. The second one, 'Where Brutality Reigns' has Iran testing its nuclear weapons and it is a matter of time before a massive war takes place between Iran and Israel. The third one, 'Where Equations Change' has the U.S. declined in its importance, Russia re-emerging, Iran undergoing a behavioural or regime change, and a single Jewish/Palestinian state in place. The fourth one, 'Where People Smile', talks about major technological breakthroughs shifting global economy away from its over-dependence on oil and gas, a movement towards democracy, free movement of goods and people across the region leading to a 'Middle East Economic Union' by 2050.

Lastly, five specific steps are prescribed to reach the fourth scenario: the U.S. should revise its interests in the region, confidence-building measures have to be taken, talks must be held, a summit should be convened and an inclusive semi-permanent conference should be established to discuss comprehensive and sustainable solutions to the problems.

The estimates are estimates. They can neither be proved nor be challenged. The entire exercise may still serve the purpose of shaking up a few leaders from their complacency. The scenario-building, similarly, is a hazardous undertaking. A best-case scenario may still allure. And as for the prescription to reach there, someone will need to take the first step. But as they say, there is no bad situation in West Asia that cannot get worse! □



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