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U.S. War Costs, Casualties, and Personnel Levels Since 9/11

Seventeen years have passed since the U.S. initiated major military operations following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. In the intervening period, operations first classified as *Global War on Terror* (GWOT) and later *Overseas Contingency Operations* (OCO) have varied in scope. Though primarily focused on locations in Afghanistan and Iraq, they have also included territories throughout Central and Southeastern Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. This In Focus summarizes major expenditures on U.S. war operations, reconstruction assistance, troop levels and casualties, and ongoing issues for Congress. This analysis narrowly defines war/non-war costs as *OCO-designated appropriated funds* associated with overseas operations as designated in DOD’s official “Cost of War (CoW)” report. Other observers may define war operations or costs more broadly (see “Issues for Congress” section).

Department of Defense War Costs

Congress has *appropriated* a total of \$1.55 trillion in discretionary amounts to the Department of Defense (DOD) for war funding since 9/11, according to DOD reporting. (See following section for OCO non-war expenditures.) *Obligations* of those amounts peaked during two surges of U.S. military activity; first in Iraq in FY2008 (\$140 billion), and then in Afghanistan in FY2011 (\$97 billion).

In Iraq and Syria, obligations for war fell with the departure of most U.S. troops in December 2011, but rose again as air and ground operations against ISIS intensified. Between FY2016 and FY2018, the U.S. obligated an average of \$7.2 billion annually for operations in Iraq and Syria.

DOD Non-War Program Costs

According to DOD reporting, roughly 12% (\$.2 trillion) of all funding appropriated through war-related requests since 9/11 has funded non-war programs. These include congressional transfers to OCO, funding for the European Deterrence Initiative, non-DOD classified programs, adjustments for (non-GWOT) fuel costs, and Army modularity programs (service restructuring).

Use of the OCO Designation

Estimates of the cumulative costs of war are complicated by the use of OCO-designated funds for base budget activities. Under current law, funding designated for emergencies and overseas contingencies is not counted under budget limits set annually by congressional budget resolutions. After passage of the Budget Control Act (BCA) in 2011, exceeding such budget caps triggers across-the-board cuts (sequestration) to agency programs.

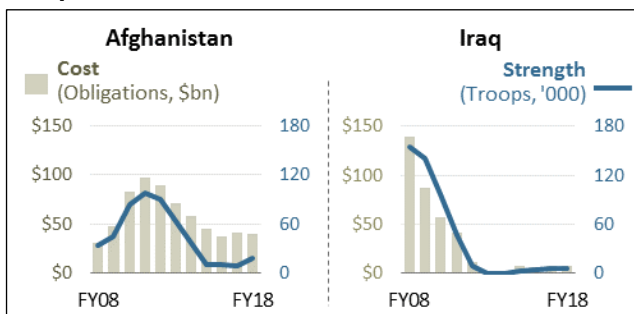
As a means of complying with the BCA, Congress and the president have increasingly designated substantial amounts of funding as OCO to provide for base military activities. Because of this practice, some argue that OCO has become a *slush fund* that obscures the true cost of both war and non-war spending. Others argue that the OCO designation affords necessary flexibility to apply funds when and where needed.

Base and Enduring Requirements

DOD’s FY2020 budget request debuts new OCO funding categories that identify the requirement for which the portion of OCO is intended. These *requirement categories* include the following:

- **Direct War Requirements** (\$25.4 billion; 15%): Direct combat support and partnership training costs.
- **OCO for Enduring Requirements** (\$41.3 billion; 24%): Indirect operational costs likely to remain even after GWOT combat operations have ended; also funds European Deterrence Initiative and Ukraine Security Assistance.
- **OCO for Base Requirements** (\$97.9 billion; 56%): Base funding included to comply with BCA spending limits.
- **Emergency Requirements** (\$9.2 billion; 5%): Includes \$2 billion in disaster relief and \$7.2 billion intended for construction of southwest border wall.

Figure 1. Iraq and Afghanistan: War Spending and Troop Levels Since 2008



Source: For costs, DOD “Cost of War,” September 2018; for troop levels, FY2020 DOD Comptroller “Defense Budget Request Overview.”

As a percentage of total OCO-designated obligations, the two conflicts have been roughly equivalent. Obligations for operations primarily in Afghanistan represent 49% (\$737 billion) overall, while those for Iraq represent 51% (\$759 billion).

Over the past three years, obligations for war spending have averaged \$47 billion per year, mostly to fund the operating support costs of U.S. forces in and around Afghanistan. Between FY2016-FY2018, the Afghan Security Forces Fund comprised 9.16% of all obligations for Afghanistan.

Non-DOD Reconstruction Costs

Congress has appropriated \$44.8 billion to non-DOD agencies (and civilians) since 2002, for reconstruction and relief operations in Afghanistan. The largest agency involved in the effort has been USAID (54%), which administers a foreign assistance account called the Economic Support Fund (ESF). The ESF accounts for \$20.5 billion, or roughly 46% of all non-DOD reconstruction assistance directed to Afghanistan.

For Iraqi reconstruction and relief efforts (2003-2012), Congress provided multiple funding streams. Roughly \$10 billion has been allocated to non-DOD agencies, primarily USAID and the State Department for the Iraq Relief and Reconstruction Fund (IRRF) and the ESF.

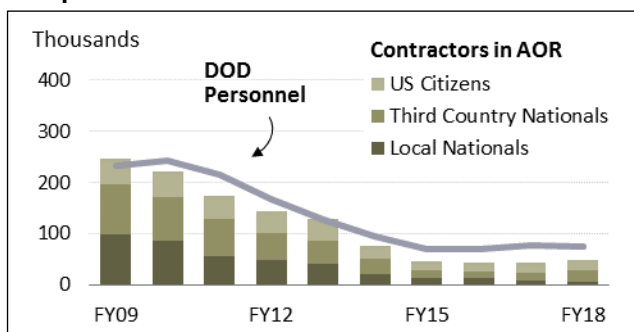
U.S. Troop Levels

Approximately 22,200 troops currently serve in Afghanistan (15,000), and Iraq and Syria (7,200). An additional 65,622 American military and civilian personnel operate in support of broader contingency operations; they are located either in-theater or elsewhere. Due to changes in the methodology DOD uses to count the number of personnel in various stages of deployment and in supporting roles, trends in troop levels since FY2018 may be subject to some variation.

DOD Contractors in CENTCOM

DOD contractors represent another significant—but often overlooked—category of military personnel working in support of contingency operations. In FY2018, an average of 48,102 U.S., local, and foreign nationals were employed in CENTCOM’s area of operations. These represent roughly 65% the total number of American military and civilian personnel in support of OCO operations in theater (74,033).

Figure 2. U.S. Forces Engaged in OCO Operations Compared to Contractors in CENTCOM



Source: Contractor data provided by DOD; Troop levels from annual DOD Comptroller “Defense Budget Request Overview.”

Notes: Excludes military personnel in-CONUS and elsewhere in support of OCO operations.

U.S. Military Casualties

Since 9/11, approximately 6,967 U.S. servicemen and women have died during OCO/GWOT operations. An additional 52,802 have been wounded.

Approximately 62% (36, 885) of all war-related incidents that resulted in U.S. military casualties have occurred during operations in Iraq, including Operation Iraqi

Freedom, Operation Inherent Resolve, and Operation New Dawn. Troops killed or wounded in operations primarily associated with Afghanistan—Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Freedom’s Sentinel—represent 38% (22,884) of the remainder.

Though most U.S. war casualties since 9/11 have occurred within the territories of Iraq and Afghanistan, 383 U.S. personnel have died during contingency operations elsewhere, such as at locations in Africa, South Asia, Central Asia, Europe, the United States, the Middle East, or at sea.

Contractor Casualties

DOD does not systematically record the deaths or injuries of U.S. contractors. Data compiled by the Department of Labor suggest that 3,413 civilian employees under contract with the U.S. government for public works or national defense have been killed in Afghanistan and Iraq in the years since 9/11. An additional 38,953 have sustained work-related injuries that resulted in four or more lost work days, the highest threshold for injury (excluding death).

Issues for Congress

Congress faces enduring oversight issues related to current and future war costs, chiefly:

Budgeting for long wars: Historically, Congress has funded major military operations in stages. At the outset of conflict, Congress has typically provided supplemental appropriations to address the most pressing military needs. In cases where hostilities persisted, war funding was gradually incorporated into the annual base budgeting process. Congressional funding for OCO/GWOT has broken this mold with the persistent use of a separate designation to pay for prolonged military operations. Congress may wish to consider whether these or some alternate models are effective templates for funding future military conflicts.

Clarifying base vs. war funding: The use of the OCO designation for funding both war and non-war requirements has created ambiguity about enduring costs unrelated to ongoing conflicts. For greater oversight and to improve future defense planning, Congress may wish to consider durable alternatives for discriminating between the temporary costs of contingency operations and long-term funding for base budget activities.

Government-wide war costs: No government-wide reporting consistently accounts for both DOD and non-DOD war costs. As a consequence, independent analysts have come to different conclusions about the total amount. Widely varying estimates risk misleading the public and distracting from congressional priorities. Congress may wish to require future reporting on war costs that consolidates interagency data (such as health care costs for combat veterans or international aid programs) in a standardized, authoritative collection.

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