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The Cost Of Striking Syria: 4 Lessons From Iraq And Afghanistan

by Linda J. Bilmes

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The miscalculations in Iraq and Afghanistan hang in the air as we weigh up whether to attack Syria. Of course, no situation is ever quite the same, and in this case the president is not urging a full-fledged invasion, just air and naval attacks. But after more than a decade of inconclusive war in the region, comparisons are inevitable.

As Mark Steyn put it in a recent piece for the National Review, “The 2003 dictator who gassed his own people was the leader of the Baath Party of Iraq. The 2013 dictator who gassed his own people is the leader of the Baath Party of Syria. Whole other ball of wax.”

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In the run-up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the Bush administration deliberately refused to consider the potential expense. Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld and Mitch Daniels (head of the Office of Management and Budget) insisted that the war would be quick and cheap — perhaps costing \$60 billion.

Larry Lindsey, the top economic advisor to President Bush, was fired for suggesting that the invasion might cost up to \$200 billion. Lindsey later wrote a book attributing many of the subsequent mistakes in Iraq to the administration's unwillingness to think about costs from the outset.

Iraq and Afghanistan will ultimately set U.S. taxpayers back between \$4 to \$6 trillion, depending on the rate of replenishment of equipment and weaponry, how many veterans ultimately require medical care, the growth rate of TRICARE (the Department of Defense health care program) for reservists, guards, and retirees, and how quickly we repay interest on war debt.

Here are four lessons from those conflicts that we should bear in mind if we intervene in Syria:

1. The costs go on long after combat phase is finished.

Even short conflicts have long term costs. The 1991 Gulf War lasted for six weeks and our coalition allies paid for the combat phase. But the U.S. now spends \$4 billion per year paying disability benefits to veterans of that conflict, many of whom suffer from conditions related to "Gulf War Syndrome." Historically, the bill for veteran's war costs *always* has come due 30 to 40 years later. The peak year for paying disability compensation to World War I veterans was in 1969. The largest expenditures for World War II veterans were in the 1980s. Payments to Vietnam veterans are still climbing.

Future expenditures will be even higher for those who fought in Iraq and Afghanistan, due to much higher survival rates, more generous benefits, and new, expensive medical treatments. The Department of Veterans Affairs has already treated more than 800,000 veterans from these conflicts, the majority of whom qualify for disability compensation for the rest of their lives. The bill for disability benefits, medical care, and Social Security Disability Insurance to these veterans will add another \$900 billion to the cost of the Iraq and Afghanistan era.

2. Failure to plan for how to pay for the war can have disastrous consequences for the economy.

The trillions of dollars spent to date for Iraq and Afghanistan have been plunked on the national credit card. How is this possible?

Starting with the initial invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the Bush administration requested, and Congress appropriated so-called "emergency supplemental" funds for war operations. (Such funding is typically reserved for natural disasters like hurricanes.) The designation allowed us to bypass all regular spending caps. This turned out to be an irresistible strategy. Over the next decade, Congress enacted the majority of war spending in 37 more "emergency supplemental" bills. This spending spree was accompanied by major tax cuts in 2001 and 2003 — thereby adding another \$2 trillion onto the national debt.

The war debt sharply constrained our flexibility in responding to the 2008 financial crisis, contributing to a stimulus package that was too small and a protracted recession — with the accompanying budget battles, fiscal cliffs, sequestration and government-closure threats.

3. The costs of war are unpredictable.

The Iraq War cost far more than originally estimated — and it also set off a chain of events that had far-reaching economic consequences.

Last month, Baron Alan West, the former head of Britain's Royal Navy, argued in the House of Lords, "There is no doubt that prime ministers and presidents think they can have clinical little military strikes and keep control of things, but you cannot. Once you start these things there is the law of unintended consequences."

One of the unintended consequences of the U.S. invasion of Iraq was the impact on oil prices, which spiked from \$25 a barrel in 2003 (where the price had remained stable for two decades) to a peak of \$140 in 2008. Since then they have rarely dipped below \$100.

Assuming that Congress authorizes military action in Syria along the lines of the resolution passed by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the U.S. will have permission to conduct non-ground operations for up to 90 days, and the goal of military operations should be to alter the balance in the civil war.

However, as my colleague Winslow Wheeler, of the Center for Defense Information, pointed out in a recent email correspondence, that would not exclude ground forces introduced for other purposes, such as "humanitarian" operations, peace keeping, or an "emergency" to seize chemical weapons stocks. It is difficult to imagine that the global economy will stand still for three months while events are unfolding.

4. The U.S. does a poor job of war accounting.

The U.S. lacks the basic accounting systems necessary to understand and analyze where and how money is spent. In Iraq and Afghanistan, weak spending controls resulted in rampant waste, fraud, profiteering, mismanagement, and co-mingling of war and non-war related funds.

The special inspector general for Iraqi reconstruction estimated that \$8 billion of the \$60 billion appropriated for reconstruction was entirely wasted.

The Pentagon's accounting system is so flawed that there is no way even to perform an audit. Indeed, officials admit they have "lost visibility" on tens of billions of dollars.

The Government Accountability Office, the Congressional Research Service, the Congressional Budget Office, Pentagon inspectors general, and others have repeatedly said that we don't even know how much we spent on these wars.

We also do not account for the value of lives lost, or the future value of deferred benefits owed to veterans.

The economic lessons from 12 years in Iraq and Afghanistan are that we underestimated the costs, borrowed all the money to pay for them, and failed to account for where it was all spent. Whatever the political calculus in Syria, we can surely do better than that.

If the United States decides to get involved in Syria, we should ask today's taxpayers to bear the upfront expense, monitor where the money is spent, and set aside funds to care for the inevitable long-term costs of those who risk their lives in combat.