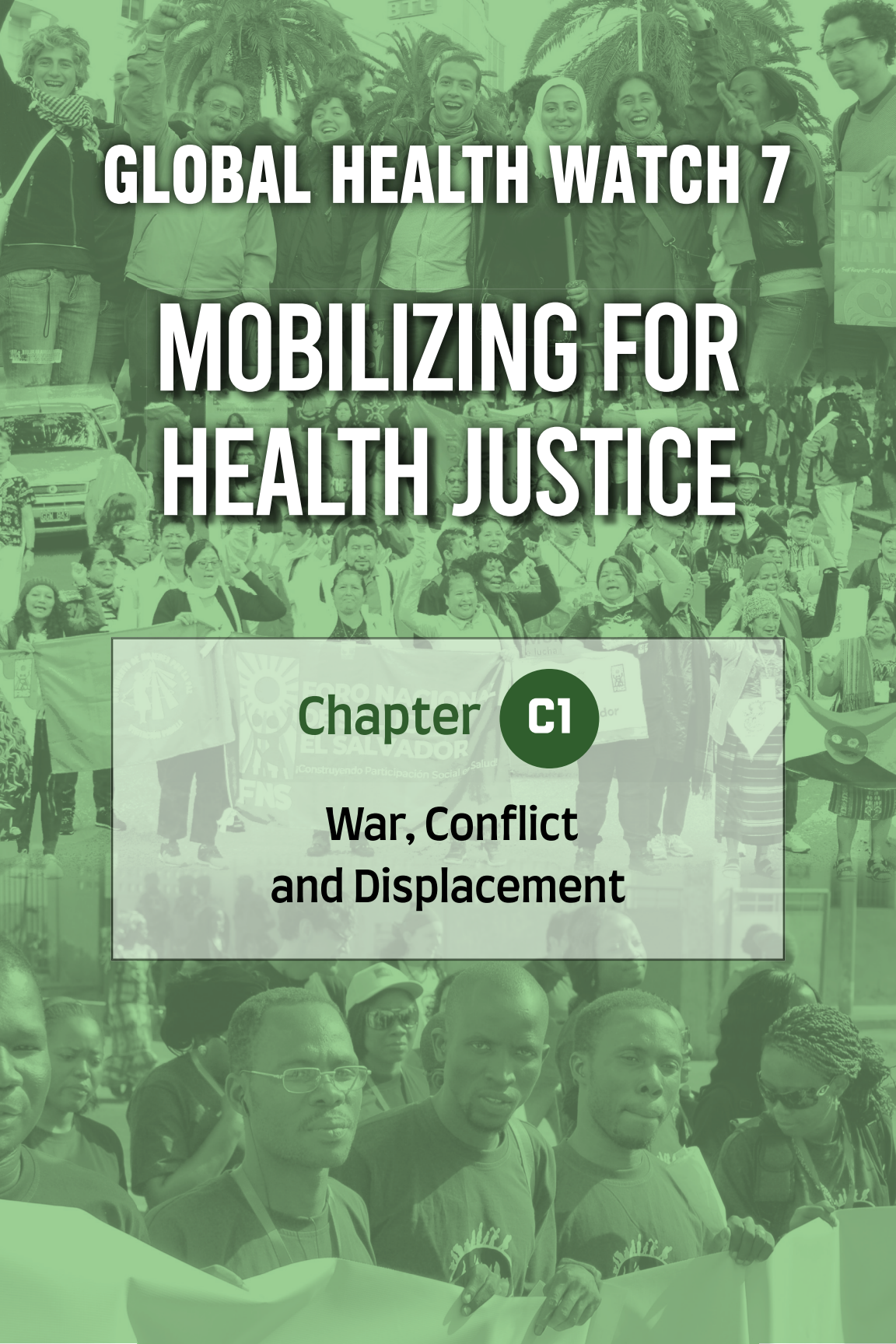




GLOBAL HEALTH WATCH 7

MOBILIZING FOR HEALTH JUSTICE

Chapter **C1**

War, Conflict and Displacement

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War, Conflict and Displacement

Introduction

War, conflict and displacement are not new to human societies, but the scale of human and ecological destruction that they bring increases with the technological capacities of the warring groups. At global scale, and by numbers alone, the health and human costs of war reached its zenith in World War Two, although centuries earlier wars in Asia (the Mongol invasions and Chinese dynastic wars) also had multiple millions of casualties. Since World War Two conflicts have been more regional than global, often involving competing regional hegemony, or are regarded in whole or in part as ‘proxy wars’ between two or more of the world’s present handful of ‘great powers’ (i.e. the USA, China, India, Russia (see Introduction Chapter)). The death toll from regional conflicts is rapidly rising, with over 237,000 conflict-related deaths in 2022, the highest number seen over the past thirty years.¹

These numbers say little about the emotional and psychosocial impacts of war, conflict and displacement; nor of the destruction and toxic contaminations of the environment the health impacts of which could be years in manifesting. The Ukraine war has created widespread chemical contamination of air, water and soil, and damaged a third of environmentally protected areas.² The first four months of bombing of Gaza (to January 2024) released more greenhouse gas emissions than the annual amounts of New Zealand and 135 other countries.³

In documenting war’s human costs, this chapter also attempts to get beneath the forces that lead to conflict. It begins by discussing the geopolitical context of war and the deliberate creation of conflict and instability. It focuses on the Middle East and North African (MENA) region but includes analyses of countries ‘invaded in the name of democracy’ and an examination of the economics of war and the humanitarian and reconstruction responses. The health tolls of four MENA countries (Libya, Yemen, Sudan and Palestine) round out the chapter before it concludes with the challenges to peace now confronting activists.

The geopolitical context of war

Understanding the geopolitical context is essential to analyzing the causes behind the emergence and evolution of military conflicts throughout history. The geopolitical context involves international and regional power structures and dynamics, economic domination and dependencies, and historical legacies, all of which intertwine and drive the onset and escalation of hostilities.

Geopolitical strategies encompass approaches and tactics that countries may employ to assert or expand their influence and manage the intricacies of global relations. Major powers use their military capabilities, economic strength, diplomatic

efforts, cultural influence and technological advancement to shape international geopolitics.^{4,5,6} For instance, the United States of America (USA) upholds its strategic reach through a vast global network of military bases and alliances, including the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO);⁷ China strives to extend its economic influence across Asia, Africa and Europe, through initiatives like the Belt and Road;⁸ and Russia capitalizes on energy resources and military interventions to regain aspects of the global role of the Soviet Union.⁹ Russia has also engaged militarily in many of the former Soviet republics to sustain its sphere of influence, the most recent being the invasion of Ukraine with the intent of reabsorbing much or all of Ukraine within Russian territory (see Box C1.1).

Box C1.1: The war in Ukraine

One of the major conflicts of the past three years is the ongoing war in Ukraine that began with Russia's full-scale invasion of the country in February 2022, eight years after it had re-claimed Crimea as part of Russia. There are competing narratives concerning the war, with one analysis seeing it as Russian president Vladimir Putin's effort to reassert and strengthen control over Russia's historic 'sphere of influence,' which includes all of the former Soviet republics or at least those not yet aligned with NATO.¹⁰ For European countries this represents a return to Cold War politics, in which their nominal security in the decades following the dissolution of the USSR could no longer be presumed. The threat of Russian military expansion became palpable.

A countervailing narrative, contrary to then US President Biden's claim that Russia's invasion was an 'unprovoked attack', argues that NATO and the USA itself were actually the provocateurs by expanding NATO membership eastwards right up against Russian borders. This was something that they had promised Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev they would not do, when Gorbachev disbanded the Warsaw Pact military alliance.¹¹ The USA, in particular, was promoting NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia to encircle and contain potential Russian expansionism, and along with France, Germany and the UK, undermined a potential peace agreement between Russia and Ukraine shortly after the war began.

There is little agreement over geopolitical roots of the Russo-Ukraine war and how the war might be ended. The same applies to estimates of the human costs of the war, with the number of troops killed (as of June 2025) varying between 111,000 and 250,000 (Russia), and 60,000 and 100,000 (Ukraine).¹² The number of injuries is thought to approach one million. Around 13,000 Ukrainian civilians have also died from the conflict,¹³ with 6 million having fled to escape war and military conscription, and 4 million more internally displaced.¹⁴

Three years after the war in Ukraine began, this logic of war must be stopped. A new accord between Trump and Putin will not bring lasting peace to Ukraine. But

Continues on next page

Box C1.1 continues

Europe cannot pursue an agenda of war at any cost, nor should it chase dangerous ambitions of becoming a (small) military and nuclear power. Nostalgia for a fractured Atlantic alliance is of little use. Europe's future now depends on its ability to end the war in Ukraine, initiate negotiations and build a lasting peace order on the continent – through political means, not military escalation.¹⁴

In recent decades, the USA has carried out the greatest number of military interventions, either independently or as part of a coalition.¹⁵ The US's prominent role in global military operations is attributed to protecting and sustaining its global plutocracy, with military interventions playing a crucial role in securing trade routes and access to natural resources.^{4,16} Many of its interventions have been in regions rich in oil, rare minerals and other strategic resources the USA needs to maintain its status as the world's leading superpower and preventing the rise of regional powers that could challenge its global geopolitical influence.^{16,17,18}

The creation of military conflicts and political instability

Leading global and regional colonial powers persist in deliberately fostering controlled internal or regional conflicts as a means to uphold their influence, manipulate political developments and legitimize military or economic interventions. This tactic, often referred to as 'managed instability' or 'controlled chaos' serves multiple strategic objectives. Fostering divisions within a country or a region – along ethnic, sectarian or political lines – prevents the emergence of unified authorities or oppositions and allows external powers to sustain political influence over the fragmented nations(s).¹⁹

The imperialist use of the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring, which began in 2010, consisted of massive waves of uprisings fueled by demands for political freedom, social justice and economic reform. Imperialist powers* strategically harnessed these movements to advance neo-liberal economic agendas and implement neocolonial strategies that reinforced their geopolitical and economic interests in the region. This influence manifested through several key mechanisms, including economic restructuring, political intervention and military involvement. In the aftermath of the uprisings, international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank advocated economic reforms characterized by market liberalization, deregulation and reduced state intervention. These policies frequently resulted in higher unemployment, greater social inequities and economic instability, which fueled disappointment with the results of the revolutions.²⁰

Imperialist powers employed various other strategies to maintain influence

*Imperialist powers are countries that exert dominance over others. 20th-century imperialist powers are generally considered to be the USA, the UK, Germany, France, Italy, Netherlands, Russia, Belgium, Japan, Turkey (Ottoman Empire), Portugal and Spain.

over the region's political and economic landscapes, including military interventions, regime support, expanded Western corporate presence and strengthened neocolonial dependence.

Military intervention in Libya

NATO countries intervened militarily in Libya in 2011, overthrowing Muammar Gaddafi* and opening up the nation's substantial oil reserves to Western corporations. This intervention precipitated widespread instability, enabling armed groups to proliferate and fostering the emergence of a warlord economy. The ensuing chaos allowed entities like the Arkenu Oil Company, linked to military commander Khalifa Haftar and his son, leaders of one of the armed groups, to export oil valued at over \$600 million since its establishment in 2023. This development signifies a departure from the previous monopoly held by the National Oil Corporation and underscores the growing influence of armed factions over Libya's oil sector.²¹

The fragmentation of Libya's political landscape has further exacerbated the situation. The country remains divided between rival governments in the east and west, each backed by various armed groups vying for control over the nation's resources. This division has led to the emergence of a war economy characterized by smuggling, extortion and the illicit exploitation of state resources, as armed groups and criminal networks capitalize on the country's instability. The competition for control over oil facilities has intensified, with competing factions seizing key terminals to exert influence and generate revenue.^{22,23,24} The illicit oil trade has further deepened Libya's divisions, with armed groups profiting from smuggling activities that fuel internal conflicts and hinder national reconciliation efforts. The entanglement of armed groups in the oil sector and the resulting economic incentives have perpetuated the conflict, making it challenging to establish a unified and peaceful Libya.

In summary, NATO's intervention in Libya has had profound and lasting effects on the nation's political and economic landscapes. The (announced) goal of protecting civilians led to an expected consequence of empowering armed groups and destabilizing the country, with Libya's oil wealth becoming both a blessing and a curse in the ensuing power struggles.

Selective support for regimes

While advocating for democratic reforms in some countries, imperialist powers continued to support authoritarian regimes in others, provided these regimes were aligned with Western interests. This selective approach exposed the fake calls for democratic transitions and highlighted the prioritization of geopolitical objectives, e.g., protecting the Israeli occupying forces and the economic interest

*Muammar Gaddafi ruled Libya from 1969 to 2011 after leading a coup against King Idris. His rule combined Arab nationalism, socialism and his unique ideology, outlined in the Green Book. Gaddafi's reign saw economic growth but also repression. NATO-backed rebels overthrew and killed him during Libya's 2011 uprising.

in the region, over the promotion of democracy or even saving lives. Western governments maintained close ties with the Egyptian, Saudi Arabian, and Emirati leadership, recognizing their pivotal role in regional stability, energy markets and global trade. This relationship endured despite the country's authoritarian governance and resistance to any democratic reforms, reflecting the West's strategic interests in preserving alliances with conservative regimes.²⁵

Expansion of Western corporate presence and influence

Following the Arab Spring, Western transnational corporations (TNCs) expanded their presence in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, capitalizing on market liberalization and the privatization of state-owned assets. This influx of foreign direct investment often prioritized profit repatriation over local economic development, leading to the exploitation of local labor and resources and perpetuating economic dependency. Despite the increased presence of TNCs, the anticipated widespread economic benefits for the local populations often failed to materialize. For instance, in Egypt, the privatization of state enterprises frequently resulted in layoffs and wage reductions, exacerbating unemployment and social inequality. Similarly, in Tunisia, the influx of foreign investment did not significantly reduce high unemployment rates, particularly among youth. These outcomes underscore the challenges of implementing neoliberal economic reforms in the MENA region and highlight the need for policies that balance foreign investment with the promotion of inclusive economic growth and social equity.²⁶

Strengthened neocolonial dependency

The combination of economic reforms, military interventions and corporate expansions served to entrench neocolonial relationships in the region. In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, several nations in the MENA region increasingly depended on loans from international financial institutions to address economic challenges (e.g. Tunisia, Jordan, Egypt, Morocco and Lebanon), where debt service payments equaled or exceeded expenditures on essential services such as education, health and social protection.²⁷ Continued military aid and cooperation with Western powers further ensured that regional security forces remained aligned with Western interests, often at the expense of democratic governance and human rights.

The increase in firearm sales

After the Arab Spring, many countries in the MENA region significantly increased their military expenditures. This surge was driven by heightened security concerns, political instability and the desire to maintain internal order.²⁸ In 2013, Saudi Arabia's military spending escalated to \$67 billion, making it the world's fourth-largest military spender after the USA, China and Russia. This increase was partly driven by tensions with Iran and concerns over potential internal unrest.²⁹ In Egypt, the military's role in the economy expanded post-2011, with the armed forces engaging in various commercial activities. This

expansion was facilitated by state stimulus spending and capital from Gulf states, allowing the military to venture into new sectors. This development underscores the intertwining of military spending and economic interests in the post-revolutionary period.³⁰

These patterns highlight a broader trend in the MENA region, where political instability has led to increased military spending, often at the expense of social and economic development and health system financing. The prioritization of defense expenditure raises questions about long-term stability and resource allocation in these countries.

Invasions in the name of democracy

Imperial powers have often claimed the necessity to invade countries in order to promote or create democratic states. The following two recent examples indicate consistent failure, with high human costs: Afghanistan and Iraq.

Afghanistan

Although the 2001 US-led invasion of Afghanistan was officially framed as a mission to bring democracy, critical scholarship argues this was fundamentally a post-hoc rationalization masking counterterror objectives. The rapid insertion of Western-style electoral systems overlooked the deep tribal, ethnic and religious structures of Afghan society, effectively imposing formal institutions without building legitimacy.^{31,32} Scholars warn that such democratic illusions often catalyze instability, as they legitimize foreign military intervention while failing to secure genuine local or regional public support.³³

Afghanistan's religious extremism has roots in Cold War geopolitics. During the 1980s Soviet–Afghan war, the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), through ‘Operation Cyclone’, channeled massive funding (\$300–600 million annually) via Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) exclusively toward Islamist mujahideen, favoring ideologically driven leaders like Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Jalaluddin Haqqani.³⁴ This policy undermined moderate factions and nurtured religious radicalism. The Haqqani network's ascendancy, broadly acknowledged as “one of the Reagan administration's most CIA-funded anti-Soviet groups” illustrates this trajectory.³⁵ Although direct CIA–Osama bin Laden links remain debated, evidence confirms that US money and materiel flowed through ISI into Islamist camps that incubated extremist militancy.^{36,37} This strategy reinforced Salafist and Deobandi ideologies via madrassas in Pakistan, creating a transnational pipeline of militants who later coalesced into groups like Al Qaeda and the Taliban.³⁸ This funding choice was a key driver for the eventual structure of Afghan fundamentalism: institutions that became deeply embedded in local and regional power structures.

After two decades of military occupation, billions in aid and the deaths of over 170,000 people, the USA completed its withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021. In a matter of weeks, the Western-backed Afghan government

collapsed, and the Taliban reclaimed power without significant resistance. The failure of the USA and its allies to establish legitimate, locally rooted institutions led to the rapid unraveling of the state,³⁹ an outcome that laid bare the unsustainable nature of externally 'promised' democracy, ultimately returning the country to the very group the invasion had sought to remove.

Iraq

Among many examples in modern history, the US Army and intelligence successfully used the 'divide and rule' tactic after the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The United States (and its decorative coalition) restructured the political system in Iraq, emphasizing ethnic and sectarian identities after enforcing a de-Ba'athification policy (removing former Ba'ath Party members, who are mostly Sunni Arabs, from government and military positions).⁴⁰ This tactic alienated the Sunni population, fueling resentment and sectarian violence, and played a key role in the emergence of insurgent groups, including Al-Qaeda in Iraq.⁴¹ Other tactics used by the USA included dividing the capital city Baghdad into sectarian enclaves, which led to physical and psychological separation of communities and exposed families with inter-ethnicity marriage to a high risk.

After the 2003 US-led invasion, Iraq's oil economy was subject to massive changes shaped by foreign intervention, internal political instability, social unrest and corruption. As one of the world's largest oil producers, with the fourth-largest proven oil reserves in the world (approximately 145 billion barrels⁴²), Iraq heavily relies on oil revenue which accounts for more than 90 per cent of government income. The USA opened Iraq's previously publicly-owned oil sector to foreign companies – including ExxonMobil, BP, Shell, TotalEnergies, and China's CNPC – to extract a good portion of the revenue out of 4.5 million barrels daily, yielding these companies \$300 billion in oil revenue generated since 2003.⁴³ After the large portion of revenues go to foreign companies, the remainder goes to the powerful political parties and militias that control much of the oil sector, using revenues for patronage and influence rather than public investment.⁴⁴ Despite the significant profits that foreign companies have been making since the US invasion, the big transnational companies requested changing the traditional oil service contracts which pay them a flat rate for each produced oil barrel after reimbursing the actual costs. They complained that these traditional contracts did not allow them to benefit from rising oil prices. In July 2023, the Iraqi government made a \$27 billion indecent deal with the French TotalEnergies, adopting a revenue-sharing model. Total takes a 45 per cent share, Basra Oil (a state-owned company) takes 30 per cent, and Qatar Energy 25 per cent.⁴⁵

The economies of war*

The financial underpinning of warfare is shaped by a multifaceted blend of economic tactics and governmental policies, reflecting the broader political and fiscal context of each nation. To sustain military engagements, states usually rely on a tetrad of funding mechanisms: increased taxation, public borrowing, military aid and, at times, the expansion of the money supply. Taxation allows governments to collect revenue directly from citizens, though it may provoke political resistance. Borrowing—often through the issuance of war bonds—spreads the financial burden over time but contributes to rising national debt. Meanwhile, printing money can provide immediate liquidity but carries the risk of inflation, especially during prolonged conflicts. Historically, the US financed World War I through a mix of increased taxes and war bonds, while the Vietnam War saw a heavier reliance on deficit spending.⁴⁶

Box C1.2: The case of Gaza: Who pays for the genocide?

The military aggression unleashed by the occupying power in Palestine is fueled by a mix of internal funding and massive foreign backing. Domestically, the Israeli Netanyahu regime has earmarked approximately \$31 billion for its 2025 defense budget—a stark escalation that underscores its war-first priorities.⁴⁷ This ballooning military expenditure has driven the debt-to-GDP (gross domestic product) ratio to 69 per cent in 2024, up sharply from 61.3 per cent the year before, revealing the steep economic cost of sustaining perpetual domination and destruction.⁴⁸

A significant portion of the occupying regime's military funding is underwritten by the United States. Under a decade-long Memorandum of Understanding signed in 2016, Washington commits \$3.8 billion annually in military aid. More recently, in a move that effectively bankrolls the ongoing campaign of destruction, US lawmakers approved an additional \$12.5 billion in supplemental aid since October 2023 and an additional \$8.7 billion in 2024.⁴⁹ These funds bolster nearly every facet of the occupation's war machine — from acquiring state-of-the-art weaponry to sustaining sophisticated defense infrastructure — fueling the systematic assault with American taxpayer dollars.

Defense contractors sit at the heart of the war economy, absorbing vast sums of foreign aid through lucrative arms deals and military services. Giants like Lockheed Martin, Boeing, General Dynamics, Raytheon Technologies and Northrop Grumman are among the chief profiteers, supplying the occupying force with cutting-edge weaponry and battlefield logistics. As the genocide unfolds, these corporations have reaped staggering financial rewards, with their stock prices surging in lockstep with the bloodshed. Their entanglement with the machinery of occupation lays bare the seamless fusion of corporate profit and military aggression.⁵⁰

*The economics of the military/industrial complex has been a recurrent theme in past Global Health Watch editions, starting with GHW1 (Chapter D5 on the health impacts of war), continuing with GHW2 (Chapter C2 deconstructing the 'war on terror') and GHW6 (Chapter C6 overviewing health, conflict, and war in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic). The dominant analysis across these chapters is the economic financing of war outstripping that for health and social protection, and why this perverse inversion of wellbeing priorities needs to be constantly challenged.

Once war coffers are filled, the machinery of violence consumes them across multiple fronts: bloated personnel salaries, massive arms procurement, sprawling logistical operations and relentless research into more efficient tools of destruction. The distribution of these funds mirrors the demands of each conflict, both tactical and technological. In World War II, the USA poured billions into industrial mobilization and weapons innovation, birthing technologies that later permeated civilian life. In the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, spending ballooned into trillions, with billions lost to corruption, failed reconstruction projects and inflated contracts handed to private firms like Halliburton and Blackwater.^{51,52} More recently, the occupier's siege on Gaza has triggered a fresh wave of arms sales and defense subsidies, lining the pockets of contractors while obliterating civilian infrastructure. This militarized spending binge routinely cannibalizes national budgets, draining resources from education, healthcare and climate resilience—mortgaging public welfare to sustain endless war.

Defense contractors play a pivotal role in absorbing wartime finances, often securing substantial portions of military budgets; from 2001 to 2020, the US Department of Defense allocated over \$14 trillion, with contractors receiving between one-third to one-half of this amount.⁵³ Defense contractors exert significant influence over military strategies and policies, extending beyond mere financial transactions. This dynamic was notably highlighted by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in his 1961 farewell address, where he warned of the “military-industrial complex”—a term describing the intertwined relationships between the military, government, and defense industries. Eisenhower cautioned that this nexus could lead to policy decisions favoring prolonged conflicts or increased military spending, primarily benefiting contractors.⁵⁴

With the war in Ukraine persisting and concerns that Putin may extend military aggression to other former Soviet republics (Moldova is seen as the likely next country),⁵⁵ the second Trump administration demanded that all NATO member states increase their defense spending to 5 per cent of their GDP or risk the USA no longer defending them.⁵⁶ Stocks in aerospace and defense corporations (many of them American) rose sharply,⁵⁷ while social justice groups expressed grave concern with expected cuts to health and social protection programs to pay for the increased militarization costs.

The other businesses of war: humanitarian aid and post-conflict reconstruction

The humanitarian aid industry

Wars and conflict create a humanitarian aid industry which, while often portrayed as a benevolent force, has faced substantial criticism for perpetuating systemic issues and, at times, exacerbating the very crises it aims to alleviate. Humanitarian assistance can be manipulated to serve political and military objectives. In Yemen, aid has been weaponized by conflicting parties, with reports indicating

that humanitarian resources are diverted to support war economies and prolong conflict. Similarly, in Gaza, the control and restriction of aid have been used as a means of exerting pressure on the population by the Israeli's occupying regime, raising concerns about the use of starvation as a weapon of war.⁵⁸

The arrival of large-scale foreign aid can destabilize local economies by fostering dependency and weakening indigenous industries. In the aftermath of disasters in Pakistan, aid initiatives have been criticized for introducing unsuitable technologies and establishing cumbersome administrative frameworks, which have skewed income distribution within the country. These kinds of interventions can obstruct long-term development and erode the capacity of local communities to achieve economic self-reliance.⁵⁹

The business of destruction and reconstruction

The intertwined industries of destruction and reconstruction in wartime contexts have garnered significant criticism for perpetuating cycles of conflict and profit. This phenomenon, often referred to as the “conflict-reconstruction complex,” suggests that the same entities involved in warfare also benefit from post-conflict rebuilding efforts, raising concerns about motivations and ethical implications. The profiteering agendas of foreign contractors sidelines the very communities it claims to rebuild. In Iraq, following the 2003 invasion, the US earmarked around \$60 billion for reconstruction, an effort that quickly devolved into a textbook case of corruption and crony capitalism. At least \$8 billion vanished into a black hole of mismanagement and fraud, with contracts frequently handed to politically connected American corporations through opaque, no-bid processes. Meanwhile, local firms and workers were largely excluded, turning what could have been a foundation for national recovery into a lucrative business model for foreign profiteers.⁶⁰ The reconstruction of Gaza following its wholesale destruction by the Israeli occupying force has been estimated at well over \$50 billion and is still rising.⁶¹

Neoliberal policies and economic disruption

The imposition of neoliberal economic policies in post-conflict environments has often deepened socioeconomic divides and sowed the seeds of future instability. These policies, characterized by aggressive privatization, deregulation and market liberalization, are typically implemented under the guise of promoting efficiency and modernization. In post-2003 Iraq, this approach proved disastrous. The rapid sell-off of state-owned enterprises and the abrupt removal of subsidies dismantled the economic safety nets that had supported millions. State employees, many of whom were dismissed without alternatives, found themselves jobless almost overnight. The collapse of domestic industries in favor of foreign contractors not only decimated local production but also stripped the country of economic sovereignty. This upheaval fueled widespread disenfranchisement, intensified poverty and ultimately contributed to the rise of insurgent groups who capitalized on the

growing resentment. Rather than stabilizing Iraq, neoliberal restructuring exacerbated the conditions for conflict and prolonged unrest.⁶²

Health impacts of war (selected cases)

Wars involve casualties, and almost invariably the brunt of death, injury and disease is borne by civilians. The recent cases below, again drawing from the MENA region and beginning, in historic order, with Libya, Yemen, and Sudan, and concluding with Palestine (Gaza).

Libya

The protracted conflict in Libya since 2011 has severely impacted the nation's health landscape, leading to high mortality and injury rates, mass displacement, the degradation of healthcare infrastructure and increased vulnerability to infectious diseases. Between 2012 and 2017, Libya recorded 16,126 conflict-related deaths and 42,633 injuries. The mortality rate stood at 2.7 per 1,000 population, while the injury rate was 7.1 per 1,000. Young males, particularly those aged 20–30, were disproportionately affected, accounting for over 40 per cent of fatalities. A third of all injuries led to permanent disabilities, often due to blast-related trauma.⁶³

The ongoing conflict has devastated Libya's healthcare infrastructure. Numerous hospitals have been damaged or destroyed, leading to closures and a severe shortage of medical supplies, including essential medications like insulin and antiretrovirals. The exodus of healthcare professionals and the targeting of medical facilities have further strained the system, rendering it ill-equipped to address both routine and emergency health needs. The conflict has also displaced approximately 435,000 individuals within Libya, forcing them to reside in overcrowded conditions with limited access to clean water, sanitation and healthcare services, heightening the risk of disease transmission and exacerbating existing health challenges.⁶⁴

The breakdown of Libya's public health system has facilitated the spread of infectious diseases, with studies indicating that internal displacement and the collapse of healthcare services have contributed to the dissemination of new HIV strains across different regions of Libya.⁶⁵

Yemen

The conflict in Yemen has similarly precipitated a multifaceted health crisis, with severe impacts on people's health, characterized by widespread disease outbreaks, malnutrition, high maternal and child mortality, and mental health crises, all of which were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶⁶ Yemen experienced the largest recorded cholera epidemic globally, with over 1.2 million suspected cases reported since April 2017. This unprecedented outbreak is attributed to the collapse of water, sanitation and healthcare infrastructures due to ongoing conflict.⁶⁷ Malnutrition among children under five remains alarmingly high. A study analyzing data from 13,624 Yemeni children found that 47 per cent were stunted,

16 per cent wasted and 39 per cent underweight. These conditions are closely linked to socioeconomic factors, maternal education and access to prenatal care.⁶⁸

The maternal mortality rate in Yemen escalated amidst the conflict. In 2019, it was reported that one woman and six newborns died every two hours due to complications during pregnancy or childbirth, reflecting a mortality rate of 164 per 100,000 live births.⁶⁹ The war, as in many other Middle East and North African countries experiencing conflict, has severely impacted mental health, with widespread psychological distress reported among the population. However, mental health services are virtually nonexistent, leaving many without necessary support.⁷⁰

Addressing these challenges requires urgent action to stop the war initiated by the Saudi-led coalition in its proxy conflict with Iran, allowing sustained international humanitarian assistance and efforts to begin restoring domestic peace and rebuilding the healthcare infrastructure.

Sudan

As the genocide in Gaza becomes more brutal (see below), the civil war in Sudan continues with less international attention. At least 150,000 people have been killed and more than 14 million people displaced since April 2023 when two factions, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), began a violent armed struggle over control of the country and its resources.⁷¹

The roots of the conflict lie in the post-colonial period that saw civil war between the country's better-off north (majority Arab and Muslim) and its poorer south (predominantly Christian and animist) with tensions that worsened during the subsequent dictatorship of Omar al-Bashir. Bashir seized power in 1989 and oversaw the Darfur war (2003-2005) in which over 300,000 people died in what is considered a genocide largely perpetrated by the Janjaweed (later formalizing as the RSF), a Arab-majority paramilitary group funded by Bashir to repress southern Sudanese rebels.⁷² The country divided in two in 2011, with the south forming an independent state of South Sudan. Bashir's oppressive regime was overthrown in 2019 in a coup carried out jointly by the SAF and RSF, where competition over power led to the present civil war.

Sudan is considered an arena for regional proxy conflict, with Egypt and Iran the major backers of the SAF, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which is heavily invested in both Sudans, is allegedly supporting the RSF.⁷³

The UAE has made large-scale agricultural investments in Sudan as part of a broader strategy to secure food supplies, access land and water, and control strategic infrastructure. Recently, UAE-linked companies such as International Holding Company (IHC) and Jenaan have leased and cultivated over 50,000 hectares (ha) in Sudan. In 2022, IHC partnered with Sudan's DAL Group to develop an additional 162,000 ha near Abu Hamad, designed to connect via a new 500 km road to a planned Red Sea port.⁷⁴ This Abu Hamad-Red Sea agricultural corridor is backed by approximately US \$6 billion in investments. The project links farmland to the pro-

posed Abu Amama port and an integrated economic zone operated by Abu Dhabi Ports Group, enabling agro-exports and enhancing UAE influence over regional logistics.⁷⁵ Hence, the involvement of UAE has a critical dimension involving both security and politics, described as a type of non-military colonialism. The UAE has been accused of supporting RSF to protect its territorial investments and logistical networks; in response, Sudan's government cancelled the port agreement in November 2024 over concerns about Emirati support for the RSF.⁷⁶

Palestine*

The humanitarian and health impact of the ongoing genocide in Palestine by Israeli occupation forces has reached catastrophic levels. From October to December 2023, in just the first few months of the war, over 8,000 Palestinian children were killed. More than 15,000 children lost their fathers, and nearly 10,000 lost their mothers, underscoring the scale of almost immediate familial devastation.⁷⁷ As the Netanyahu regime intensified its bombardments of Gaza the scale of death and destruction grew unimaginably worse.

A January 2025 study estimated Gaza mortality in the war with Israeli occupying forces at between 55,298 and 78,525 between October 2023 and June 2024.⁷⁸ 59 per cent of the deaths were women, children and people over the age of 65. Using officially reported deaths only, and a conservative multiplier for indirect deaths due to conflicts, researchers estimate that by June 2024 186,000 Palestinians had died from the conflict.⁷⁹ During the first 12 months of the war, life expectancy dropped by 35 per cent to just half of its former average of 75 years;⁸⁰ and more women and children were killed than in any other 12-month period of armed conflict over the past two decades.⁸¹

Healthcare infrastructure has been deliberately targeted, with over 300 attacks on medical facilities reported and only 19 of Gaza's 36 hospitals partially operational (7 providing only basic emergency care), with 94 per cent damaged or destroyed, by early 2025. The collapse of water and sanitation systems has driven surges in disease: 180,000 upper respiratory infections, 136,400 diarrhea cases and over 55,000 cases of lice and scabies were reported as of December 2024.⁸² The mental health burden is profound. PTSD symptoms affect 5 per cent of children and 40 per cent of adults; depression and anxiety rates are similarly high.⁸³ (see also Chapter C2)

At end of 2024, two million Palestinians in Gaza were living in internal displacement; with 92 per cent of housing destroyed, the combined rubble of the destruction (including Gaza's schools, health facilities, roads and public buildings) is 14 times greater than all conflicts combined since 2008. These figures highlight the scale of collective punishment and forced expulsion practices.⁸⁴

*Our focus on the impacts of the war on Palestinians does not ignore the 7 October 2023 Hamas attack that killed 1,200 people, sometimes brutally, and abducted 251 hostages, many of which subsequently died. The response by the Israeli occupying force, however, has been hugely disproportionate to the initial Hamas assault and continues with the reported intent (by some Israeli ministers) to force all Palestinians out of Gaza.

Figure 1: Al Shifa Hospital after a two-week Israeli siege, April 2024

World Health Organization (<http://bit.ly/4eCH1Xo>)

These numbers are now dated, given the continued occupation and destruction of Gaza and, in March 2025, the Israeli blockade of all aid, food and fuel, and shutting off electricity to its main desalination plant virtually eliminating access to water. These actions have induced severe malnutrition, extreme hunger and high levels of starvation. Since late May 2025, when a US/Israel private agency set up two inadequately supplied emergency distribution sites, over 400 Palestinians have been killed, most by Israeli occupying forces, as they desperately attempted to obtain food.⁸⁵ These genocidal actions by the Israeli occupying forces are considered war crimes. UN Security Council calls for an immediate cease fire and resumption of full aid to Gaza are routinely vetoed by the US Trump administration. The Israeli occupying force (at the time of writing in mid-June) continues its fighting and bombardment with flagrant impunity.

One other notable and horrific feature of the war on Gaza: The targeting of health facilities and health workers. As of June 2025, this weaponization of health has destroyed or severely damaged at least 94 per cent of all health facilities in Gaza.⁸⁶ Over 1,400 health care workers have been killed,⁸⁷ and many others have been injured, detained, tortured or disappeared. This is the systematic dismantling of an entire health system, a grave breach of the Geneva Convention agreed upon in the aftermath of World War Two's destructiveness. The Israeli occupying force disagrees, arguing that Hamas uses these facilities from which to engage in armed conflict, or that the facilities (and patients within them) are used as human shields. This would remove the 'protected status' of such facilities, and their targeting would no longer constitute a war crime; but international law is clear that for this to occur the attackers must show clear proof (in all instances) that this is

the case. Otherwise, the assumption is that these facilities (along with most of the other buildings destroyed by the bombing of Gaza) are protected places.⁸⁸

The Israeli occupying force is not alone in targeting health facilities and health workers. Since February 2022, there have been almost 2,000 Russian attacks on health care facilities in Ukraine, destroying or damaging over 900 hospitals and clinic,⁸⁹ resulting in the death of over 244 health workers.⁹⁰ Attacks on health facilities and health workers in Sudan's civil war have also occurred, though not at the same extent as in Gaza or Ukraine.⁹¹ Hamas's (or Iran's) indiscriminate retaliatory bombings of Israel, and especially the recent Iranian targeting of an Israeli hospital in Soroka (June 2025), similarly violate international law governing conflict.

Conclusion: The excesses of neoliberal capitalist wars

War, conflict and the mass displacement of people are not new phenomena but have been regrettable features of human societies for millennia. The degree of physical damage and human carnage they create depends on the technologies of the weaponry available and the narcissistic viciousness of their combatting leaders. What this chapter illustrates is that the growth and consumption logic of capitalism incentivizes war and conflict to become larger, more destructive, and more profitable over time, with both world wars marking extremes in mortality and morbidity of combatants and civilians alike. Recent conflicts and displacements may now be more regional than global (though the risk of global war is increasingly present, see Introduction) but regional conflicts often function as competitions between the world's 'great' or imperialist powers. Their enmeshment with the logic of neoliberal capitalism has emboldened autocratic leaders and strengthened the wealth generation and power of the 'military/industrial complex' we were first warned about at the close of the second world war. Our systems of global governance, notably the UN and its Security Council, embody the countries that emerged victoriously from that war, and no longer reflect the multipolar global order (see Chapter A1).

Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Trump administration's trade war and bullying demand that NATO member states increase their military spending, a non-diminishing number of regional conflicts, the intensification of xenophobic 'othering' of migrant and refugee populations (see Chapter C2) and the US desire to restrain the rise of China as a hegemonic competitor bode ill for a peaceful near future. This underscores the importance of strengthening counter-narratives drawn from those described in Chapters A1, A2, and A3; and embracing, as health activists have long done, the political imperative of peace and the moral imperative of care.

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