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## **Hawkish U.S. Policies Pose Bigger Threat to Peace Than Climate Change**

By John Horgan | November 12, 2014

[In a previous post](#), I poked my nose into the debate over whether climate change will precipitate more conflict. I offered a half dozen objections to predictions that more warming means more war. ADVERTISEMENT



U.S. military interventions have been responsible for a large proportion of war deaths worldwide since 2001.

One objection was that “many people making decisions that lead to large-scale violence—politicians, generals, warlords, drug kingpins and so on—work indoors in climate-controlled conditions, insulated from shifts in atmospheric temperature.”

This, in retrospect, may be my most important point, so I shouldn’t have expressed it so cryptically. I’ll try now to spell it out more clearly.

There is a disturbing bias—or blind spot—in the way the debate about climate and conflict is often framed by American scholars, notably [Marshall Burke](#), [Solomon Hsiang and Edward Miguel](#), and journalists such as [Chris Mooney](#). They focus on how higher temperatures and related phenomena—droughts, crop failures, flooding of coastal areas,

mass migration—might trigger violence, especially in developing regions.

Scholars generally either neglect to mention the U.S. military or refer to it only as a potential suppressor of climate-related conflict. See for example the publications of the [Center for Climate and Security](#), a nonprofit think tank whose advisory board consists of “senior retired military leaders and security professionals.” But the U.S. military has recently been a source rather than suppressor of armed conflict.

Reliable, up-to-date information on global trends in war-related deaths isn’t easy to compile. Scholars disagree on what counts as a war or a war-related death, so estimates vary. But according to a 2014 [report from the Peace Research Institute Oslo](#), PRIO, between 2002 and 2012 there were fewer than 40,000 “battle-related deaths” per year. Syria’s civil war accounted for 40 percent of all war fatalities in 2012. Recent casualty reports from Syria are so unreliable that PRIO did not issue a 2013 estimate. But let’s assume that war has killed about half a million people worldwide since 9/11.

During this same period, the U.S. and its allies invaded Afghanistan, with the violence spilling over into Pakistan, and Iraq. [The Costs of War project](#), based at Brown University’s Watson Institute for International Studies, estimates that since 2001 [between 298,000 and 354,000 people have died](#) due to “direct war violence” in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. The dead include “armed forces on all sides, contractors, journalists, humanitarian workers and civilians.”

According to these tallies—which do not take into account recent U.S. bombing of Iraq and Syria—the U.S. is implicated in more than half of all war-related deaths since 9/11.

Caveats: Costs of War apparently uses different methods for counting war-related deaths, leading to higher estimates than those of PRIO. Moreover, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq were volatile before the U.S. occupations, so armed conflicts might have claimed many victims in those regions even if the U.S. had never intervened. But clearly the U.S. has been a major contributor to war-related fatalities in this millennium.

The U.S. also contributes to global violence by flooding the world with weapons, from small arms to supersonic jets. The U.S. is the world's largest arms exporter, accounting for 29 percent of total arms sales, according to the [Stockholm International Peace Research Institute](#), SIPRI.

The U.S. is hardly the only state whose officials are launching military attacks from climate-controlled offices. The governments of Russia, Syria and Israel, among others, have contributed their share lately. I focus on the U.S. because its contributions to global violence dwarf those of other nations—and because I'm an American, and hence responsible in my own minute way for my country's actions.

I expect the Pentagon, [when it warns that global warming might increase global violence](#), to overlook how hawkish U.S. policies fuel conflict. I expect more of supposedly objective scholars and journalists.

Photo of U.S. soldiers in Iraq, 2007, by Elisha Dawkins, Wikimedia Commons,

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**About the Author:** Every week, hockey-playing science writer John Horgan takes a puckish, provocative look at breaking science. A teacher at Stevens Institute of Technology, Horgan is the author of four books, including *The End of Science* (Addison Wesley, 1996) and *The End of War* (McSweeney's, 2012). Follow on Twitter [@Horganism](#).

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