

Tulsi Gabbard: Wake Up And Smell Our \$6.4 Trillion Wars

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The Democratic establishment is increasingly irritated. Representative Tulsi Gabbard, long-shot candidate for president, is attacking her own party for promoting the “deeply destructive” policy of “regime change wars.” Gabbard has even called Hillary Clinton “the queen of warmongers, embodiment of corruption, and personification of the rot that has sickened the Democratic Party.”

Senator Chris Murphy complained: “It’s a little hard to figure out what itch she’s trying to scratch in the Democratic Party right now.” Some conservatives seem equally confused. The *Washington Examiner*’s Eddie Scarry asked: “where is Tulsi distinguishing herself when it really matters?”

The answer is that foreign policy “really matters.” Gabbard recognizes that George W. Bush is not the only simpleton warmonger who’s plunged the nation into conflict, causing enormous harm. In the last Democratic presidential debate, she explained that the issue was “personal to me” since she’d “served in a medical unit where every single day, I saw the terribly high, human costs of war.” Compare her perspective to that of the ivory tower warriors of Right and Left, ever ready to send others off to fight not so grand crusades.

The best estimate of the costs of the post-9/11 wars comes from the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs at Brown University. The Institute says that \$6.4 trillion will be spent through 2020. They estimate that our wars have killed 801,000 directly and resulted in a multiple of that number dead indirectly. More than 335,000 civilians have died—and that’s an extremely conservative guess. Some 21 million people have been forced from their homes. Yet the terrorism risk has only grown, with the U.S. military involved in counter-terrorism in 80 nations.

Obviously, without American involvement there would still be conflicts. Some counter-terrorism activities would be necessary even if the U.S. was not constantly swatting geopolitical wasps’ nests. Nevertheless, it was Washington that started or joined these unnecessary wars (e.g., Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen) and expanded necessary wars well beyond their legitimate purposes (Afghanistan). As a result, American policymakers bear responsibility for much of the carnage.

The Department of Defense is responsible for close to half of the estimated expenditures. About \$1.4 trillion goes to care for veterans. Homeland security and interest on security expenditures

take roughly \$1 trillion each. And \$131 billion goes to the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development, which have overspent on projects that have delivered little.

More than 7,000 American military personnel and nearly 8,000 American contractors have died. About 1,500 Western allied troops and 11,000 Syrians fighting ISIS have been killed. The Watson Institute figures that as many as 336,000 civilians have died, but that uses the very conservative numbers provided by the Iraq Body Count. The IBC counts 207,000 documented civilian deaths but admits that doubling the estimate would probably yield a more accurate figure. Two other respected surveys put the number of deaths in Iraq alone at nearly 700,000 and more than a million, though those figures have been contested.

More than a thousand aid workers and journalists have died, as well as up to 260,000 opposition fighters. Iraq is the costliest conflict overall, with as many as 308,000 dead (or 515,000 from doubling the IBC count). Syria cost 180,000 lives, Afghanistan 157,000, Yemen 90,000, and Pakistan 66,000.

Roughly 32,000 American military personnel have been wounded; some 300,000 suffer from PTSD or significant depression and even more have endured traumatic brain injuries. There are other human costs—4.5 million Iraqi refugees and millions more in other nations, as well as the destruction of Iraq's indigenous Christian community and persecution of other religious minorities. There has been widespread rape and other sexual violence. Civilians, including children, suffer from PTSD.

Even stopping the wars won't end the costs. Explained Nita Crawford of Boston University and co-director of Brown's Cost of War Project: "the total budgetary burden of the post-9/11 wars will continue to rise as the U.S. pays the on-going costs of veterans' care and for interest on borrowing to pay for the wars."

People would continue to die. Unexploded shells and bombs still turn up in Europe from World Wars I and II. In Afghanistan, virtually the entire country is a battlefield, filled with landmines, shells, bombs, and improvised explosive devices. Between 2001 and 2018, 5,442 Afghans were killed and 14,693 were wounded from unexploded ordnance. Some of these explosives predate American involvement, but the U.S. has contributed plenty over the last 18 years.

Moreover, the number of indirect deaths often exceeds battle-related casualties. Journalist and activist David Swanson noted an "estimate that to 480,000 direct deaths in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan, one must add at least one million deaths in those countries indirectly caused by the recent and ongoing wars. This is because the wars have caused illnesses, injuries, malnutrition, homelessness, poverty, lack of social support, lack of healthcare, trauma, depression, suicide, refugee crises, disease epidemics, the poisoning of the environment, and the spread of small-scale violence." Consider Yemen, ravaged by famine and cholera. Most civilian casualties have resulted not from Saudi and Emirati bombing, but from the consequences of the bombing.

Only a naïf would imagine that these wars will disappear absent a dramatic change in national leadership. Wrote Crawford: "The mission of the post-9/11 wars, as originally defined, was to defend the United States against future terrorist threats from al-Qaeda and affiliated organizations. Since 2001, the wars have expanded from the fighting in Afghanistan, to wars and

smaller operations elsewhere, in more than 80 countries—becoming a truly ‘global war on terror’.”

Yet every expansion of conflict makes the American homeland more, not less, vulnerable. Contrary to the nonsensical claim that if we don’t occupy Afghanistan forever and overthrow Syria’s Bashar al-Assad, al-Qaeda and ISIS will turn Chicago and Omaha into terrorist abattoirs, intervening in more conflicts and killing more foreigners creates additional terrorists at home and abroad. In this regard, drone campaigns are little better than invasions and occupations.

For instance, when questioned by the presiding judge in his trial, the failed 2010 Times Square bomber, Faisal Shahzad, a U.S. citizen, cited the drone campaign in Pakistan. His colloquy with the judge was striking: “I’m going to plead guilty 100 times forward because until the hour the U.S. pulls its forces from Iraq and Afghanistan and stops the drone strikes in Somalia and Yemen and in Pakistan and stops the occupation of Muslim lands and stops Somalia and Yemen and in Pakistan, and stops the occupation of Muslim lands, and stops killing the Muslims.”

Ajani Marwat, with the New York City Police Department’s intelligence division, outlined Shahzad’s perspective to *The Guardian*: “‘It’s American policies in his country.’ ... ‘We don’t have to do anything to attract them,’ a terrorist organizer in Lahore told me. ‘The Americans and the Pakistani government do our work for us. With the drone attacks targeting the innocents who live in Waziristan and the media broadcasting this news all the time, the sympathies of most of the nation are always with us. Then it’s simply a case of converting these sentiments into action’.”

Washington does make an effort to avoid civilian casualties, but war will never be pristine. Combatting insurgencies inevitably harms innocents. Air and drone strikes rely on often unreliable informants. The U.S. employs “signature” strikes based on supposedly suspicious behavior. And America’s allies, most notably the Saudis and Emiratis—supplied, armed, guided, and until recently refueled by Washington—make little if any effort to avoid killing noncombatants and destroying civilian infrastructure.

Thus will the cycle of terrorism and war continue. Yet which leading Democrats have expressed concern? Most complain that President Donald Trump is negotiating with North Korea, leaving Syria, and reducing force levels in Afghanistan. Congressional Democrats care about Yemen only because it has become Trump’s war; there were few complaints under President Barack Obama.

What has Washington achieved after years of combat? Even the capitals of its client states are unsafe. The State Department warns travelers to Iraq that kidnapping is a risk and urges businessmen to hire private security. In Kabul, embassy officials now travel to the airport via helicopter rather than car.

Tulsi Gabbard is talking about what really matters. The bipartisan War Party has done its best to wreck America and plenty of other nations too. Gabbard is courageously challenging the Democrats in this coalition, who have become complicit in Washington’s criminal wars.

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