



## WAR'S INVISIBLE HAND: THE GLOBAL ECHO OF WAR

Abhinav Tiwari\* Wajiha Siddiqui\*

### ABSTRACT

*The article, "War's Invisible Hand: The Global Echo of War," argues that war's devastation extends far beyond traditional battlefields, profoundly impacting global political systems, economies, human development, and psychological stability. Even seemingly "local" conflicts can trigger chain reactions, displace populations and affect distant nations. The true cost of war is not merely in battlefield statistics, but in the "invisible scars etched into civilian lives". Economically, modern warfare creates widespread disruptions, affecting global markets through supply chain interruptions, commodity volatility, and fluctuating energy prices. The conflict in Ukraine, for example, caused global price surges in wheat and fuel and so much more, demonstrating that no region is truly insulated from military aggression. Historically, Middle East wars have also led to significant oil price increases, stagflation and various impacts on society. This interconnectedness means global economic stability relies heavily on regional peace. War also generates profound humanitarian crises, most notably through mass displacement. The Syrian civil war alone displaced over 13 million people, straining host countries' social services and economies. Beyond physical displacement, there's a significant, often invisible, psychological toll on war-affected populations. Photojournalism, such as Don McCullin's work, powerfully captures the vulnerability and desolation of displaced individuals, serving as a universal plea for empathy. Finally, the article delves into proxy wars, a prevalent form of indirect military involvement where outside powers back local factions. While offering strategic flexibility for external powers, they complicate conflict resolution and carry significant risks of escalation. The Cold War-era conflicts in Vietnam, Korea, and Afghanistan serve as historical precedents for how internal disputes can become international battlegrounds. Proxy wars obscure responsibility, lead to impunity for humanitarian law breaches, and cause long-term insecurity and economic disintegration in*

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\*BA LLB, THIRD YEAR, CITY LAW COLLEGE, LUCKNOW.

\*BA LLB, THIRD YEAR, CITY LAW COLLEGE, LUCKNOW.

*affected areas. Furthermore, conflicts reshape international relations, shifting alliances and creating power vacuums. The Syrian civil war exemplifies this, becoming a proxy battlefield with global ramifications. The article also highlights environmental degradation as a "silent but equally disastrous heritage," citing examples like Agent Orange in Vietnam and the destruction of infrastructure in modern conflicts. Ultimately, the article stresses that the effects of war are never geographically or temporally confined, demanding a proactive, transnational approach to conflict resolution and peace building.*

**Keywords:** Photo Journalism, War Memory Preservation, Human Empathy, Ethical Witnessing, Moral Responsibility.

## THE UNSEEN FRONTLINES OF CONFLICT

War is frequently envisioned as a violent contest between armies across clearly demarcated battlegrounds, but this view obscures the deeper and more pervasive impacts of conflict that ripple across continents. The devastation unleashed by war rarely remains confined to the zones of active engagement. Instead, it radiates outward, disrupting global political systems, economic networks, human development, and psychological stability. Regional conflicts, even those dismissed as “local” or “limited,” have a way of triggering chain reactions that destabilize entire regions, drawing in foreign powers, displacing populations, and testing the resilience of distant democracies.<sup>1</sup> The most telling examples of war’s reach are not always found in battlefield statistics but in the invisible scars etched into civilian lives, even far from the frontlines. Consider the psychological trauma experienced by refugees who flee from war zones but carry with them long-term mental health challenges. Host countries often lack the resources to provide adequate psychological support, creating secondary crises within their borders.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, conflicts tend to exacerbate economic inequalities both within and between nations. For instance, countries neighbouring conflict zones frequently see inflows of refugees that strain housing, health care, and labour markets, often leading to xenophobia and political polarization.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, wars disrupt global supply chains, affecting everything from food prices to energy security. The conflict in Ukraine, for example, sent shockwaves

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Kaldor, *New & old wars: organized violence in a global era* (Stanford University Press 2012)

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR, Strengthening mental health and psychosocial support in UNHCR: achievements in 2021 and priorities for 2022 and beyond (UNHCR June 2022) <https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/unhcr-annual-report-mhpss-2022.pdf> accessed 23 July 2025

<sup>3</sup> Justin Damien Guénette, Philip Kenworthy and Collette Wheeler, *Implications of the War in Ukraine for the Global Economy* (World Bank April 2022) <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/5d903e848db1d1b83e0ec8f744e55570-0350012021/related/Implications-of-the-War-in-Ukraine-for-the-Global-Economy.pdf> accessed 23 July 2025

through worldwide wheat and fuel markets, proving that no region is insulated from regional military aggression. Even consumers in distant nations felt the pinch through inflation and shortages, underscoring how interdependent the global economy has become.<sup>4</sup> In turn, economic instability fuels unrest in countries unrelated to the war itself, triggering a feedback loop that spreads instability further. Environmental degradation is another overlooked consequence of modern warfare. Armed conflicts damage natural ecosystems, destroy infrastructure critical to sanitation and clean water, and leave behind toxic legacies such as landmines and chemical contaminants. These environmental consequences have long-term implications for public health and ecological balance, especially in areas already vulnerable to climate change.<sup>5</sup> The cultural dimension is equally compelling. War erodes not only physical infrastructure but also the social and moral fabric of societies. Don McCullin's haunting photographs capture this essence, portraying not just the violence of conflict but the enduring emotional impact it leaves behind. His work echoes a broader truth: societies are profoundly shaped by war, whether they are active participants or passive observers.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, the frontlines of conflict stretch into classrooms, voting booths, hospital wards, and family kitchens, wherever the effects of war are felt in policy, identity, or memory.<sup>7</sup> In the final analysis, the consequences of war are never neatly confined. The interconnected nature of today's world ensures that even regional hostilities are felt far and wide. Understanding this extended geography of conflict is essential if the international community hopes to respond effectively not just to military crises, but to the humanitarian, environmental, and psychological aftershocks that inevitably follow.<sup>8</sup>

## THE ECONOMIC ECHO: GLOBAL MARKETS AND DISRUPTED SUPPLY CHAINS

Modern warfare is no longer a contained or isolated event. In an increasingly interdependent world, localised conflicts have a disproportionate influence on global markets. Regional wars,

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<sup>4</sup> WFP Ukraine, *Ukraine Food Security Trend Analysis 2022* (World Food Programme March 2023) <https://www.wfp.org/publications/ukraine-food-security-trend-analysis-2022> accessed 23 July 2025

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Maruma Mrema, Carl Bruch and Jordan Diamond, *Protecting the environment during armed conflict: an inventory and analysis of international law* (UNEP November 2009) <https://www.unep.org/resources/report/protecting-environment-during-armed-conflict-inventory-and-analysis-international> accessed 23 July 2025

<sup>6</sup> Imperial War Museum, *Shaped by War: Photographs by Don McCullin* (2011) [https://www.iwm.org.uk/sites/default/files/press-release/Shaped\\_by\\_War\\_Press\\_Release.pdf](https://www.iwm.org.uk/sites/default/files/press-release/Shaped_by_War_Press_Release.pdf) accessed 23 July 2025

<sup>7</sup> Emma Sky, 'The Iraq War and Democratic Backsliding' (2023) 34 *Journal of Democracy* 135

<sup>8</sup> Joseph S Nye Jr and Jack Landman Goldsmith, 'The Future of Power' (2011) 64 *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 45 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41149419> accessed 23 July 2025

such as the ongoing conflict in Ukraine or historical wars in the Middle East, have repeatedly demonstrated that the fallout from violence can be felt in distant economies across every continent.<sup>9</sup> This transnational effect is primarily channelled through disruptions in supply chains, volatility in commodity markets, and fluctuating energy prices, all of which contribute to inflation, unemployment, and political unrest elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> A poignant example is the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. As two of the world's largest grain exporters, any disruption in Ukrainian or Russian agricultural output immediately impacts global food security.<sup>11</sup> Countries in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East that rely on imports from these regions saw skyrocketing prices for wheat, sunflower oil, and corn. This price volatility exacerbated pre-existing vulnerabilities, especially in post-pandemic economies.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, the conflict disrupted oil and gas flows to Europe, prompting energy shortages and leading the European Union to scramble for alternative energy sources, further driving up global energy prices.<sup>13</sup>

The Middle East provides a historical mirror. Conflicts such as the Iran-Iraq War or the Gulf War triggered sharp rises in oil prices, leading to stagflation in many Western economies during the 1970s and early 1990s.<sup>14</sup> When supply routes through the Strait of Hormuz, through which one-third of global seaborne oil passes, are threatened, markets panic. Shipping insurance premiums soar, speculative trading increases, and prices spike globally.<sup>15</sup> In both historic and modern examples, the economic consequences are disproportionate to the geographical location of the conflict. Globalization has only intensified these effects. Modern

<sup>9</sup> Ariya Das, 'A Review of "New and Old Wars"' *Global Affairs Review* (NYU School of Professional Studies Global Affairs Review 5 April 2018) <[https://wp.nyu.edu/schoolofprofessionalstudies-ga\\_review/a-review-of-new-and-old-wars/#:~:text=Kaldor%E2%80%99s%20first%20edition%20of%20the%20book%20%281999%29%20was,war%20and%20the%20benefits%20of%20a%20state-led%20intervention.>](https://wp.nyu.edu/schoolofprofessionalstudies-ga_review/a-review-of-new-and-old-wars/#:~:text=Kaldor%E2%80%99s%20first%20edition%20of%20the%20book%20%281999%29%20was,war%20and%20the%20benefits%20of%20a%20state-led%20intervention.>) accessed 25 July 2025

<sup>10</sup> World Bank, 'Conflict in Middle East Could Bring "Dual Shock" to Global Commodity Markets' (Press Release, 30 October 2023) <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2023/10/26/commodity-markets-outlook-october-2023-press-release> accessed 25 July 2025

<sup>11</sup> High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE-FSN), *The impacts on global food security and nutrition of the military conflict in Ukraine* (Briefing Note, 14 April 2022) [https://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/cfs/Docs2122/Bur/220429/Impacts\\_of\\_the\\_military\\_conflict\\_in\\_Ukraine\\_on\\_global\\_FSN\\_HLPE\\_briefing\\_note\\_2022-04-14.pdf](https://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/cfs/Docs2122/Bur/220429/Impacts_of_the_military_conflict_in_Ukraine_on_global_FSN_HLPE_briefing_note_2022-04-14.pdf) accessed 25 July 2025

<sup>12</sup> International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook, October 2022: Countering the Cost-of-Living Crisis* (October 2022) <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2022/10/11/world-economic-outlook-october-2022> accessed 25 July 2025

<sup>13</sup> International Energy Agency, *Ukraine's Energy Security and the Coming Winter* (IEA September 2024) <https://www.iea.org/reports/ukraines-energy-security-and-the-coming-winter> accessed 25 July 2025

<sup>14</sup> Anthony H Cordesman, 'War and the Iraqi Economy: A Case Study' (CSIS, 15 September 2015) <https://www.csis.org/analysis/war-and-iraqi-economy-case-study> accessed 25 July 2025

<sup>15</sup> U.S. Energy Information Administration, *World Oil Transit Chokepoints* (EIA June 2024) [https://www.eia.gov/international/content/analysis/special\\_topics/World\\_Oil\\_Transit\\_Chokepoints/wotc.pdf](https://www.eia.gov/international/content/analysis/special_topics/World_Oil_Transit_Chokepoints/wotc.pdf) accessed 25 July 2025

supply chains span multiple countries and rely on just-in-time logistics systems. Disruption in one node, whether a Ukrainian grain terminal or a Middle Eastern port, can cascade across entire production systems, impacting everything from automobile manufacturing in Germany to food processing in Kenya.<sup>16</sup> This interdependence amplifies the reach of conflict, demonstrating how economic stability worldwide hinges on regional peace and secure trade routes.<sup>17</sup>

## **HUMANITARIAN CRISES WITHOUT BORDERS: REFUGEE FLOWS AND DISPLACEMENT**

One of the most immediate and tragic consequences of war is the mass displacement of populations.<sup>18</sup> Conflicts create a chain of humanitarian crises as civilians are forced to flee violence, persecution, or the complete collapse of infrastructure. These forced migrations do not stop at national borders; they frequently spill over into neighbouring countries, straining their social services, economies, and political systems. The refugee crisis is thus not a peripheral consequence of war but a central feature of its destructive reach.<sup>19</sup> The Syrian civil war alone displaced over 13 million people, half of whom fled the country, inundating Europe and parts of Asia and overwhelming asylum systems.<sup>20</sup> Neighbouring countries like Lebanon and Jordan took in millions, placing unprecedented pressure on housing, education, healthcare, and employment sectors. These strains often ignite local tensions, with citizens perceiving refugees as competitors for scarce resources. Political backlash soon follows, as anti-migrant rhetoric gains traction and polarizes domestic discourse.<sup>21</sup> Beyond physical displacement, there's the psychological toll, often invisible, yet deeply damaging. War-affected populations carry trauma from witnessing violence, losing loved ones, and enduring long journeys of survival. Many host countries lack the infrastructure for trauma-informed care, particularly for women and children, who are often most vulnerable to abuse,

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<sup>16</sup> United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, *Issues note on measuring e-commerce and the digital economy* (UNCTAD 2022) [https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/ditcinf2022d2\\_en.pdf](https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/ditcinf2022d2_en.pdf) accessed 25 July 2025

<sup>17</sup> Pragnan Deb, *Market Frictions, Interbank Linkages and Excessive Interconnections* (IMF Working Paper WP/16/180, 2016) <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/wp/2016/wp16180.pdf> accessed 25 July 2025

<sup>18</sup> UNHCR, *Global Trends Report 2022* (UNHCR June 2023) <https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends-report-2022> accessed 25 July 2025

<sup>19</sup> Dany Bahar and Meagan Dooley, *Refugees as assets not burdens: The role of policy* (Brookings Institution February 2020) [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/refugees\\_as\\_assets\\_not\\_burdens\\_final.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/refugees_as_assets_not_burdens_final.pdf) accessed 25 July 2025

<sup>20</sup> UNHCR, 'UNHCR Syria: 2022 Reports' (2022) <https://www.unhcr.org/sy/2022-reports> accessed 25 July 2025

<sup>21</sup> International Organization for Migration, 'Lebanon Humanitarian Crisis' (2024) <https://www.iom.int/lebanon-humanitarian-crisis> accessed 25 July 2025

trafficking, and exploitation during displacement.<sup>22</sup> Photojournalism has powerfully documented these stories. Don McCullin's images, particularly from Bangladesh's 1971 War of Independence, capture the vulnerability and desolation of displaced populations. The image of a child curled into a fetal position or children with signs of extreme malnutrition brings the crisis into sharp, human focus.<sup>23</sup> These visual testimonies transcend national narratives, evoking a universal plea for empathy and action.<sup>24</sup> Humanitarian consequences of war are often compounded by concurrent crises, disease outbreaks, food shortages, and crumbling health systems. McCullin's collaboration with Christian Aid on HIV/AIDS in Africa is a testament to how conflict zones often exacerbate ongoing health emergencies.<sup>25</sup> The overlap of armed conflict with pandemics or endemic diseases is not incidental; it is the inevitable byproduct of societal collapse, weak governance, and international neglect.<sup>26</sup>

## **POLITICAL REALIGNMENTS AND SHIFTING ALLIANCES: A GEOPOLITICAL CHESSBOARD**

War not only destroys buildings and lives; it also reshapes the architecture of international relations. Regional conflicts often catalyze shifts in alliances, reveal underlying tensions in existing partnerships, and create power vacuums in new players.<sup>27</sup> These changes redefine how countries relate to one another, impacting diplomacy, trade, military cooperation, and soft power dynamics for decades.<sup>28</sup> The Syrian civil war is one of the clearest examples of this geopolitical domino effect. Originally an internal uprising, it soon attracted the interests of major powers Russia backing the Assad regime, the United States and its allies supporting opposition groups, and regional players like Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia pursuing their

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<sup>22</sup> Amnesty International, *Amnesty International Report 2022/23: The state of the world's human rights* (Amnesty International March 2023) [https://www.amnesty.nl/content/uploads/2023/03/202223-air-english\\_2023-03-22\\_corr1.pdf?x46672](https://www.amnesty.nl/content/uploads/2023/03/202223-air-english_2023-03-22_corr1.pdf?x46672) accessed 25 July 2025

<sup>23</sup> Riccardo Bianchini, 'War in the Eyes of the People: IWM London's New Galleries' (Inexhibit, 15 April 2023) <https://www.inexhibit.com/case-studies/war-eyes-people-iwm-london-new-galleries/> accessed 25 July 2025

<sup>24</sup> Imperial War Museum, *Shaped by War: Photographs by Don McCullin* (2011) [https://www.iwm.org.uk/sites/default/files/press-release/Shaped\\_by\\_War\\_Press\\_Release.pdf](https://www.iwm.org.uk/sites/default/files/press-release/Shaped_by_War_Press_Release.pdf) accessed 23 July 2025

<sup>25</sup> Médecins Sans Frontières, 'Conflict and war' (May 2023) <https://www.msf.org/war-and-conflict> accessed 25 July 2025

<sup>26</sup> Paul B Spiegel and others, 'The CHH–Lancet Commission on Health, Conflict, and Forced Displacement: Reimagining the humanitarian system' (March 2024) 403(10433) *The Lancet* 1215–1217 <https://www.thelancet.com/series-do/conflict-health> accessed 25 July 2025

<sup>27</sup> Joseph S Nye Jr, *Power in the Global Information Age: From Realism to Globalization* (Routledge 2004) <https://www.perlego.com/book/1615867/power-in-the-global-information-age-from-realism-to-globalization-pdfcitation> accessed 25 July 2025

<sup>28</sup> Center for Strategic and International Studies, 'Defense and Security' (2024) <https://www.csis.org/defense-and-security> accessed 26 July 2025



strategic agendas. These competing interventions turned Syria into a proxy battlefield, with ramifications for NATO cohesion, U.S.-Russia relations, and the regional balance of power in the Middle East.<sup>29</sup> Conflicts in the Horn of Africa, such as in Ethiopia and Sudan, have similarly invited international interest not just for humanitarian concerns, but because of strategic geography, trade routes, and emerging rivalries between China, the U.S., and Gulf states. As a result, diplomatic configurations are constantly in flux, with countries recalibrating their positions to align with shifting power dynamics.<sup>30</sup> Smaller states, in particular, are often forced to realign their foreign policy in response to conflicts, either out of necessity or opportunity. For example, countries in Eastern Europe reoriented their security priorities after Russia invaded Ukraine, seeking deeper integration with NATO and the EU.<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile, previously non-aligned states, like Finland and Sweden, abandoned decades of neutrality to seek NATO membership, a dramatic realignment caused directly by regional war.<sup>32</sup> These shifting alliances are not without consequence. They affect global institutions like the United Nations, where vetoes and diplomatic deadlock hinder responses to crises. They influence military funding, arms sales, peacekeeping missions, and humanitarian aid decisions.<sup>33</sup> In this fluid chessboard of global politics, every move reverberates across borders, impacting not only state relations but also international law, security cooperation, and global governance structures.<sup>34</sup>

## **SOCIAL AND CULTURAL FABRIC UNDER STRESS: POLARIZATION AND XENOPHOBIA**

Both displacements of population and humanitarian crises have been the usual outcome of military conflict and political system destabilization for decades. But their secondary socio-political effects, especially xenophobia, nationalism, and societal polarization, are equally profound and enduring in nature. Compelled movement of individuals from one country to

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<sup>29</sup> Jeremy Shapiro and Miriam R Estrin, 'The Proxy War Problem in Syria' (Brookings, 4 February 2014) <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-proxy-war-problem-in-syria/> accessed 26 July 2025

<sup>30</sup> Dr Arindam Saha, 'The Geopolitics of the Red Sea Crisis: Implications for Global Trade and Security' (Modern Diplomacy, 26 April 2025) <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2025/04/26/the-geopolitics-of-the-red-sea-crisis-implications-for-global-trade-and-security/> accessed 26 July 2025

<sup>31</sup> Tamás Orbán, 'Brussels Goes Onto War Footing With "Security College"' (The European Conservative, 10 March 2025) <https://europeanconservative.com/articles/news/brussels-eu-security-college-rearm-europe-von-der-leyen/> accessed 26 July 2025

<sup>32</sup> BBC News, 'War in Ukraine' (2025) <https://www.bbc.com/news/war-in-ukraine> accessed 26 July 2025

<sup>33</sup> Vibhu Mishra, 'US vetoes Security Council resolution demanding permanent ceasefire in Gaza' (UN News, 4 June 2025) <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/06/1164056> accessed 26 July 2025

<sup>34</sup> Jeffrey Feltman, 'War, peace, and the international system after Ukraine' (Brookings, 28 March 2023) <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/war-peace-and-the-international-system-after-ukraine/> accessed 26 July 2025

another is sure to create emotional public dread, especially in such countries receiving individuals, where they see the arriving people posing threats to their national security, economic fortunes, and cultural make-up.<sup>35</sup> Such feelings are ordinarily hyped by populist political discourse and sensationalized media coverage, which may considerably erode social cohesion and spark divisions between and among nations. Perhaps the most symbolic illustration of this phenomenon in recent times is the European refugee crisis, precipitated by long-standing conflict in the Middle East and North Africa, most of all the Syrian civil war.<sup>36</sup> Between 2015 and 2016, the European Union experienced more than one million asylum seekers and migrants, unprecedented humanitarian mobilization as well as fierce political polarization.<sup>37</sup> Whereas nations such as Germany, under the leadership of Chancellor Angela Merkel, followed an open-door policy grounded in humanitarian duty,<sup>38</sup> others Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic opted for securitization and cultural defense, routinely presenting refugees as "existential threats" to European Christian identity.<sup>39</sup>

The crisis, therefore, catalyzed the return to power of right-wing populist parties throughout Europe. These parties capitalised on public fears by promoting anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, and nationalist agendas, contributing to an increasingly polarized political environment.<sup>40</sup> In France, the National Front (now National Rally) used the refugee issue to boost electoral gains; in Austria, the Freedom Party entered a coalition government for the first time in over a decade; and in Italy, the rise of Matteo Salvini's League was partially driven by migration politics.<sup>41</sup> These movements not only shaped immigration policy but also reframed national identity narratives along exclusionary lines, portraying multiculturalism as a failed experiment and migration as a direct threat to Western civilization.<sup>42</sup> This sociopolitical reorganization had material implications for migrant societies, especially Muslim nations. A European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) report noted a spike in hate crime,

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<sup>35</sup> Alexander Betts, *Survival Migration: Failed Governance and the Crisis of Displacement* (Cornell University Press 2013)

<sup>36</sup> UNHCR, 'Syria Emergency' (UNHCR, 2023) <https://www.unhcr.org/syria-emergency.html> accessed 22 July 2025

<sup>37</sup> UNHCR, 'Europe Situation' (UNHCR, 2020) <https://www.unhcr.org/europe-emergency.html> accessed 22 July 2025

<sup>38</sup> Matthias Matthijs, 'Europe After the Refugee Crisis: Closing the Door' (2017) 56(6) *Foreign Affairs* 47, 49–50

<sup>39</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Strangers at Our Door* (Polity Press 2016) 53–54

<sup>40</sup> Cas Mudde, 'The Populist Radical Right: A Pathological Normalcy' (2010) 39(4) *West European Politics* 1167

<sup>41</sup> Hanspeter Kriesi and Takis S Pappas (eds), *European Populism in the Shadow of the Great Recession* (ECPR Press 2015) 112–115

<sup>42</sup> Ruud Koopmans, 'The Impact of Immigration on the Political Culture of European Societies' in Markus Thiel (ed), *The 'Migration Crisis' in the European Union* (Palgrave Macmillan 2019) 105–121



racism, and social exclusion of Muslims during and after the peak of the refugee crisis.<sup>43</sup> In most cases, in the countryside, migrants faced housing discrimination, restricted access to the labor market, and restricted access to education, all of which made integration an extremely challenging task.<sup>44</sup> The price of such exclusionary systems was emotionally high and went into the production of exclusion and resentment loops.<sup>45</sup> Most importantly, the polarizing impact of such crises extends beyond migrants themselves. Indigenous society becomes ideologically polarized between cosmopolitan and nationalist extremes, liberalism and authoritarianism, and sympathy and xenophobia.<sup>46</sup> The character of polarization undermines democratic deliberation and civic solidarity and results in more cynical, fragmented, and politically divided societies.<sup>47</sup> Researchers have cautioned that such deep-seated polarization is hard to reverse because it would probably outlive the first crisis and plant lasting hatred into political culture.<sup>48</sup> The policy consequences of these dynamics are substantial. Governments have to not only deal with the logistical impediments of integrating refugees but also confront underlying sociopolitical cleavages that such flows lay bare and aggravate. To fail to do so may deepen societal cleavages, justify xenophobic politics, and undermine liberal democratic tenets.<sup>49</sup> As Martha Nussbaum contends, to inculcate a cosmopolitan ethic based on a recognition of shared humanity is essential to counteract the moral corrosion that regularly follows fear-based nationalism.<sup>50</sup>

## ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION AND LONG-TERM CONSEQUENCES: A SILENT CATASTROPHE

Though the direct human toll of war, death, displacement, and trauma habitually receives the lion's share of international attention, the environmental destruction wrought by war is a

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<sup>43</sup> FRA, 'Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey (EU-MIDIS II): Muslims – Selected Findings' (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2017)

<https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2017/eumidis-ii-muslims-selected-findings> accessed 22 July 2025

<sup>44</sup> OECD, *Indicators of Immigrant Integration 2015: Settling In* (OECD Publishing 2015)

<https://www.oecd.org/migration/indicators-of-immigrant-integration-2015-settling-in-9789264234024-en.htm> accessed 22 July 2025

<sup>45</sup> James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (Vintage Books 1993) 34–37

<sup>46</sup> David Miller, *Strangers in Our Midst: The Political Philosophy of Immigration* (Harvard University Press 2016) 142–144

<sup>47</sup> Yascha Mounk, *The People vs Democracy: Why Our Freedom is in Danger and How to Save It* (Harvard University Press 2018) 98–103

<sup>48</sup> Thomas Carothers and Andrew O'Donohue, *Democracies Divided: The Global Challenge of Political Polarization* (Brookings Institution Press 2019) 15–19

<sup>49</sup> European Commission, 'Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–2027' (EC 2020)

[https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/action-plan-integration-and-inclusion-2021-2027\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/action-plan-integration-and-inclusion-2021-2027_en) accessed 22 July 2025

<sup>50</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *The Cosmopolitan Tradition: A Noble but Flawed Ideal* (Harvard University Press 2019) 87–90

silent but equally disastrous heritage. The environmental impact of war involves worldwide pollution, habitat loss, deforestation, and collapse of systems of environmental governance.<sup>51</sup> Beyond the battlefield, these events spill over borders, destroying ecosystems, climate regimes, and public health systems in distant areas far removed from the source of the conflict.<sup>52</sup> The long-term, low-level, and irreparable character of the damage renders environmental degradation a dimension of conflict less researched but in urgent need of international legal and policy attention.<sup>53</sup>

A prime example is the Vietnam War, where the United States sprayed over 80 million litres of herbicides, such as Agent Orange, over South Vietnam in an operation called Operation Ranch Hand<sup>54</sup>. The objective was to clear the vegetation cover employed by Viet Cong forces, but the unintended effects were disastrous. About 2 million hectares of agricultural and forest land were lost, and millions of civilians were put in contact with dioxins, resulting in long-term health issues such as cancers, birth defects, and respiratory disease.<sup>55</sup> The long-term environmental impacts like soil erosion, biodiversity loss, and water pollution still linger decades later.<sup>56</sup> Modern conflicts, particularly in industrialized and urbanized regions, create another but no less problematic environmental problem. The destruction of oil refineries, petrochemical plants, and sewage systems in Syria, Iraq, and Ukraine from recent hostilities pollutes air, land, and water on a massive scale.<sup>57</sup> For example, in Iraq, the 1991 Gulf War witnessed the deliberate dumping of approximately 10 million barrels of oil into the Persian Gulf by the withdrawing Iraqi troops, which turned into one of the most severe oil spills ever and ravaged marine habitats.<sup>58</sup> Poisons discharged in civilian zones in Syrian air raids added

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<sup>51</sup> Doug Weir, *Conflict and Environment Observatory Report: Environmental Dimensions of Armed Conflicts* (CEOBS 2020) 4–6 <https://ceobs.org> accessed 23 July 2025

<sup>52</sup> Carl Bruch, *War and the Environment: New Approaches to Protecting the Environment in Relation to Armed Conflict* (Cambridge University Press 2017) 13–17

<sup>53</sup> Richard A Matthew and others, 'Environmental Dimensions of Armed Conflict' (2009) 26(3) *Environmental Change and Security Program Report* 16

<sup>54</sup> Stellman JM and others, 'The Extent and Patterns of Usage of Agent Orange and Other Herbicides in Vietnam' (2003) 42(4) *Nature* 681

<sup>55</sup> Jeanne M Stellman and Steven D Stellman, 'Agent Orange: Exposure During the Vietnam War' (Columbia University 2004) <https://columbia.edu/~jsv/pdf/agentorange.pdf> accessed 23 July 2025

<sup>56</sup> Vietnam Red Cross, *Agent Orange in Vietnam: The Continuing Tragedy* (2013)

<sup>57</sup> Wim Zwijnenburg, *Living Under a Black Sky: Conflict Pollution and Environmental Health Concerns in Iraq* (PAX for Peace 2017) <https://paxforpeace.nl/media/download/pax-report-living-under-a-black-sky.pdf> accessed 23 July 2025

<sup>58</sup> UNEP, *Protecting the Environment During Armed Conflict: An Inventory and Analysis of International Law* (United Nations Environment Programme 2009) 32–34 <https://www.unep.org/resources/report/protecting-environment-during-armed-conflict> accessed 23 July 2025

to the humanitarian emergency with long-term health hazards.<sup>59</sup> The environmental toll of war also crosses over into climate change. Wartime combustion of fossil fuels generates greenhouse gases on a large scale, while environmental destruction of sinks like forests enhances global warming.<sup>60</sup> Additionally, war frequently incapacitates environmental protection and regulation, paving the way for illicit exploitation of natural resources like deforestation, mining, and wildlife poaching in post-conflict states weakened by violence.<sup>61</sup> In landscapes like the Congo Basin and the Amazon, war has provided an avenue for unregulated environmental use, not only at risk to biodiversity but also to indigenous livelihoods and climate objectives globally.<sup>62</sup>

Additionally, the environmental consequences of conflict tend to be most powerfully experienced by vulnerable groups, such as women, indigenous peoples, and the rural poor, who depend immediately on natural resources for survival.<sup>63</sup> Environmental degradation in zones of conflict can therefore compound preexisting inequalities, undermine food and water security, and fuel secondary conflicts over limited resources, thus perpetuating a cycle of instability and degradation.<sup>64</sup> Despite increasing awareness of these problems, international law governing the environmental effects of war is still sparse and under-enforced. Although Article 55(1) of Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions requires the protection of the natural environment in armed conflict, its standard of "widespread, long-term and severe damage" has been hard to implement.<sup>65</sup> Environmental war crimes are also addressed in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, albeit with sparse enforcement.<sup>66</sup> Experts and environmentalists continue to demand more effective legal tools and post-conflict ecological

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<sup>59</sup> Human Rights Watch, 'Syria: Toxic Chemicals Used in Idlib Attack' (HRW, 2017)

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/05/01/syria-toxic-chemicals-used-idlib-attack> accessed 23 July 2025

<sup>60</sup> Patrick Bigger and Ben Neimark, 'Weaponizing Nature: The Environmental Footprint of War' (2017) 49(4) *Geopolitics* 695

<sup>61</sup> Richard Rogers and Thomas L Friedland, 'Resource Wars and Environmental Security in the Congo' (2020) 18(2) *Global Environmental Politics* 67

<sup>62</sup> UNEP, *Greening the Blue Helmets: Environment, Natural Resources and UN Peacekeeping Operations* (2012) [https://postconflict.unep.ch/publications/UNEP\\_greening\\_blue\\_helmets.pdf](https://postconflict.unep.ch/publications/UNEP_greening_blue_helmets.pdf) accessed 23 July 2025

<sup>63</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), 'When Rain Turns to Dust: Understanding and Responding to the Combined Impact of Armed Conflicts and the Climate and Environment Crisis on People's Lives' (2020) <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/icrc-report-when-rain-turns-dust> accessed 23 July 2025

<sup>64</sup> Erika Weinthal, Jeannie Sowers, and Neda Zawahri, 'The Environmental Dimensions of the Syrian Conflict' (2017) 22(3) *Middle East Report* 41–45

<sup>65</sup> Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949 (adopted 8 June 1977, entered into force 7 December 1978) 1125 UNTS 3 (Protocol I), art 55

<sup>66</sup> Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (adopted 17 July 1998, entered into force 1 July 2002) 2187 UNTS 90, art 8(2)(b)(iv)

rehabilitation programs such as reforestation, decontamination, and ecosystem and community rehabilitation.<sup>67</sup>

## THE SHADOW OF PROXY WARS: INDIRECT INVOLVEMENT AND ESCALATION RISKS

Proxy wars in which outside powers back local factions instead of fighting themselves are a potent and increasingly prevalent type of indirect military involvement in the contemporary international system.<sup>68</sup> It enables states to seek geopolitical interests without the political or military burden of direct war, while at the same time making conflict resolution more complicated.<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless, proxy wars have destabilizing consequences in the areas where they play out and involve considerable risks of escalation, especially when miscalculations, mission creep, or retaliatory strikes entangle other actors in larger confrontations.<sup>70</sup>

Historically, the Cold War (1947–1991) offers a living model for examining the dynamics and perils of proxy warfare. The bipolar conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States was mostly defined by indirect rivalry through client nations, ideological allies, and armed proxies, culminating in longstanding and catastrophic conflicts in Vietnam, Korea, Afghanistan, Angola, and Central America.<sup>71</sup> It was in all these instances that indigenous tensions were fueled by the injection of weapons, foreign funding, and military training, turning internal disputes into battlegrounds of international rivalry.<sup>72</sup> The most oft-quoted example is the Vietnam War (1955–1975). It started as a civil and nationalist war, but with the involvement of Americans and Soviet-Chinese, it grew into a full-blown international crisis.<sup>73</sup> America considered its military engagement as part of a larger strategy for containing communism, while the USSR and China provided weapons and advisers to North Vietnam.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Doug Weir and others, 'Reparations for Environmental Damage in Conflict: Practice and Prospects' (2020) *Journal of International Humanitarian Legal Studies* 38

<sup>68</sup> Andrew Mumford, *Proxy Warfare* (Polity Press 2013) 2–4

<sup>69</sup> Daniel Byman, 'Why Engage in Proxy War? A State's Perspective' (2018) 38(1) *Brookings Institution Analysis* <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/why-engage-in-proxy-war/> accessed 23 July 2025

<sup>70</sup> Hal Brands and Peter Feaver, 'The Myth of the Proxy War: Why Great Powers Fight Directly, Not by Proxy' (2019) 57(2) *Security Studies* 284

<sup>71</sup> Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge University Press 2005) 97–125

<sup>72</sup> Bruce D Jones, 'Peacekeeping and the Proxy Dynamic' (2019) *United Nations University Centre for Policy Research* 3 <https://unu.edu/publications/policy-briefs/peacekeeping-and-the-proxy-dynamic.html> accessed 23 July 2025

<sup>73</sup> Mark Atwood Lawrence, *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History* (Oxford University Press 2008) 32–33

<sup>74</sup> George C Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975* (McGraw Hill 2001) 87–90

It ended up being a long war that brought severe human suffering, environmental devastation, and political polarization, culminating in American withdrawal without success.<sup>75</sup> A second notable example is the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1979–1989), in which the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan supported the Mujahideen rebels with money, arms, and intelligence, most significantly through Operation Cyclone, one of the CIA's longest and most costly clandestine operations.<sup>76</sup> Although this helped bring about eventual Soviet withdrawal, it also set the stage for subsequent instability, including the growth of militant jihadist movements that would come to pose a threat to international security.<sup>77</sup>

Syria's war has escalated today to a threatening crisis of several proxy wars between global and regional powers. Russia and Iran have been aiding the Assad regime with brutality, while the United States, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar have been backing several oppositional groups.<sup>78</sup> It is a splintered battlefield today with several agendas, changing allegiances, and an inability to achieve enduring peace. The indirect intervention of foreign players prolonged the war and amplified civilian casualties to hundreds of thousands dead and millions displaced.<sup>79</sup> Proxy wars tend to obscure lines of responsibility. When states sponsor non-state paramilitary forces, insurgents, or militias, breaches of international humanitarian law often do not lead to punishment and thus facilitate impunity cycles.<sup>80</sup> Additionally, arms proliferation and state institution erosion in proxy war areas cause long-term insecurity, lawlessness, and economic disintegration.<sup>81</sup> In Yemen and Libya, among other places, the effects of proxy warfare have reduced governance institutions to shambles and humanitarian crises into intractability.<sup>82</sup> The risk of escalation in proxy conflicts cannot be overemphasized. As interests compete, even minor incidents like the shootdown of a military plane or an assault on an embassy can lead to broader conflict, particularly in multipolar

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<sup>75</sup> Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (Random House 2012) 451–457

<sup>76</sup> Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden* (Penguin Books 2004) 69–88

<sup>77</sup> Peter Bergen, *Holy War, Inc.: Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden* (Free Press 2001) 113–115

<sup>78</sup> Charles Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency* (Oxford University Press 2015) 192–198

<sup>79</sup> Human Rights Watch, 'Syria: Events of 2023' (HRW, 2024) <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/syria> accessed 23 July 2025

<sup>80</sup> ICRC, 'International Humanitarian Law and Challenges of Contemporary Armed Conflicts' (Report, 33rd International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent 2019) <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/international-humanitarian-law-and-challenges-contemporary-armed-conflicts> accessed 23 July 2025

<sup>81</sup> Patrick Cockburn, *The Rise of Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution* (Verso 2015) 65–70

<sup>82</sup> UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 'Yemen Humanitarian Overview 2023' <https://www.unocha.org/yemen> accessed 23 July 2025

geopolitics.<sup>83</sup> The danger of unintended events, such as the spillover of violence into neighboring countries or the local radicalization of populations, is ever-present.<sup>84</sup> The 2022 war in Ukraine, though not in the classical sense a proxy war, shares features of great power competition waged through indirect and hybrid means, illustrating how contemporary warfare increasingly resists traditional categorizations.<sup>85</sup> In conclusion, proxy wars offer strategic flexibility for external powers but inflict disproportionate harm on the host nations. Their inherent risks of escalation, moral hazards, and destructive legacies necessitate greater international regulation and accountability mechanisms. The development of legal norms under the UN Charter and the Geneva Conventions to control third-party interventions must evolve to meet the realities of asymmetric and hybrid conflict in the 21st century.<sup>86</sup> Without such reforms, the shadow of proxy wars will continue to undermine global peace and regional stability.

## RESILIENCE AND RESPONSE: GLOBAL EFFORTS AND THE PATH FORWARD

In the context of the enormous humanitarian, environmental, and socio-political costs of war, the international response architecture has also come to offer short-term relief and long-term stabilization measures. These initiatives are not only crucial in mitigating human misery in the short run but also provide the basis for recovery, reconciliation, and durable peace. Despite the complex hurdles faced by global actors ranging from limits on access, politicization, and weak peace processes, worldwide interventions in the shape of humanitarian intervention, peacekeeping missions, and documentation of culture continue to be a necessity in developing a way forward.<sup>87</sup> Leading the way in this response are humanitarian organizations like the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). These agencies offer essential services, such as emergency medical care, displacement assistance, food and water delivery, and civilian protection.<sup>88</sup> In 2023 alone,

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<sup>83</sup> Daniel L Byman and Sarah E Kreps, 'Escalation and Intrawar Deterrence in Iraq and Afghanistan' (2010) 34(2) *International Security* 7–8

<sup>84</sup> Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *The First World War in the Middle East: A Clash of Empires* (Hurst 2014) 168–170

<sup>85</sup> Michael Kofman and Andrea Kendall-Taylor, 'The Ukraine Conflict: A New Form of Proxy War?' (2022) *Center for a New American Security* <https://www.cnas.org/publications/commentary/the-ukraine-conflict-a-new-form-of-proxy-war> accessed 23 July 2025

<sup>86</sup> UN General Assembly, *Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts*, UNGA Res 56/83 (12 December 2001) UN Doc A/RES/56/83; see also Geneva Conventions (1949) and Protocols I and II (1977)

<sup>87</sup> Alex J Bellamy and Paul D Williams, *Understanding Peacekeeping* (3rd edn, Polity Press 2021) 6–9

<sup>88</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), 'What We Do' (ICRC, 2024) <https://www.icrc.org/en/what-we-do> accessed 23 July 2025



UNHCR supported more than 117 million forcibly displaced individuals globally, underscoring the scale and urgency of international displacement caused primarily by conflict.<sup>89</sup> Nonetheless, operational hindrances like limitations on humanitarian access, targeting of aid workers, and absence of long-term funding still limit the effectiveness of these operations.<sup>90</sup>

At the same time, international legal mechanisms and diplomatic efforts seek to forestall the eruption of war and settle existing crises. Organizations such as the United Nations Security Council, the International Court of Justice (ICJ), and the International Criminal Court (ICC) are central to mediation, arbitration, and post-conflict justice.<sup>91</sup> Deployment of UN peacekeeping troops, operating today in more than a dozen nations, has been a crucial conflict-containment tool, disarmament device, and instrument for the protection of civilian populations.<sup>92</sup> However, peacekeeping operations remain undermined by mandates, denial of cooperation by the host states, and poorly funded contingents, prompting scholars to advocate for stronger, community-oriented models of peace building.<sup>93</sup> In addition to short-term humanitarian and diplomatic interventions, the maintenance of memory and record of conflict plays an equally critical role. Institutions like the Imperial War Museum (IWM) in London serve as custodians of war memory, encouraging public awareness of the causes, consequences, and human cost of warfare.<sup>94</sup> The IWM's highly praised exhibition "Shaped by War", based on the work of renowned photojournalist Don McCullin, provided a raw and intimate insight into conflict regions from Vietnam to Syria.<sup>95</sup> McCullin's photographs, frequently showing civilians in the line of fire, force viewers to confront the brutal face of war and subvert sanitized political myths.<sup>96</sup> Such records serve an important function not only in transitional justice but also in international activism and historical remembrance. As a witness to war, photography helps to gather evidence for tribunals and inform human rights

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<sup>89</sup> UNHCR, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2023* (UNHCR 2024)

<https://www.unhcr.org/statistics/unhcrstats/2024-global-trends-report> accessed 23 July 2025

<sup>90</sup> Humanitarian Outcomes, 'Aid Worker Security Report 2023' (2024)

<https://www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/publications/aid-worker-security-report-2023> accessed 23 July 2025

<sup>91</sup> United Nations, 'Peace and Security' <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/peace-and-security> accessed 23 July 2025

<sup>92</sup> UN Peacekeeping, 'Where We Operate' (United Nations, 2025) <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/where-we-operate> accessed 23 July 2025

<sup>93</sup> Séverine Autesserre, *The Frontlines of Peace: An Insider's Guide to Changing the World* (Oxford University Press 2021) 45–47

<sup>94</sup> Imperial War Museums (IWM), 'Our Mission and History' <https://www.iwm.org.uk/about/mission> accessed 23 July 2025

<sup>95</sup> Imperial War Museums, 'Shaped by War: Photography by Don McCullin' (Exhibition Archive)

<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/70000329> accessed 23 July 2025

<sup>96</sup> Don McCullin, *Shaped by War* (Jonathan Cape 2010) x–xi

advocacy campaigns.<sup>97</sup> It also provokes public awareness, which presses political leaders and civil society actors to enforce humanitarian standards and deter future crimes.<sup>98</sup> Cultural institutions thus supplement legal and humanitarian action by inserting narratives of resiliency, suffering, and justice into global communal memory. Moving forward, the path to the future needs a multilevel, interdisciplinary approach to conflict. This includes reform of international humanitarian law enforcement, greater investment in conflict prevention and early warning, and inclusion of local voices in peace building efforts.<sup>99</sup> Since conflicts are becoming more complex and protracted, complexified by climate change, economic disparities, and ideological radicalism, the international community must reaffirm its commitment to upholding human dignity and building resilient society.

### **TOWARDS A SHARED UNDERSTANDING OF WAR'S INTERCONNECTEDNESS**

Summarily, the effects of war are not geographically or time-bound. Although the theatre of war may be localized within certain boundaries, its aftershocks, economic, social, environmental, and psychological, are worldwide and long-lasting.<sup>100</sup> War upsets commerce, encourages mass migration, destabilizes institutions, contaminates the environment, and entrenches identity-based divisions, frequently in areas far distant from the initial site of hostilities.<sup>101</sup> As historic precedents and recent crises have shown, war exists in a global matrix of interlinking susceptibilities, touching not only those directly involved in the fighting but also international civil society, global institutions, and human collective consciousness. Such interconnection of conflict requires a similar change in how it is being dealt with: from crisis management reacting to it to proactive, transnational collaboration.<sup>102</sup> It requires more vigorous multilateral diplomacy, effective humanitarian systems, and preventive legal mechanisms for early intervention and prolonged peace building.<sup>103</sup> Recognizing the common global interests in peace and stability allows the international community to transcend parochial interests and understand that conflict somewhere represents a moral and material challenge everywhere. As Susan Sontag put it so movingly,

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<sup>97</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (Penguin Books 2004) 37–40

<sup>98</sup> Barbie Zelizer, *About to Die: How News Images Move the Public* (Oxford University Press 2010) 91–95.

<sup>99</sup> International Crisis Group, 'Ten Challenges for the UN in 2025' (Crisis Group 2025)

<https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/ten-challenges-un-2025> accessed 23 July 2025

<sup>100</sup> Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (3rd edn, Polity Press 2012) 113–117

<sup>101</sup> Richard A Matthew and others, 'Understanding the Environmental Dimensions of Armed Conflict' (2009) 26(3) *Environmental Change and Security Program Report* 16–21

<sup>102</sup> UN Secretary-General, *Our Common Agenda: Report of the Secretary-General* (UN 2021)

<https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/> accessed 23 July 2025

<sup>103</sup> Alex J Bellamy and Paul D Williams, *Understanding Peacekeeping* (3rd edn, Polity Press 2021) 371–374

"War is always with us. Or, at least, it is always with someone, and by proxy with us."<sup>104</sup> This feeling encapsulates the ethical imperative behind international reactions to war. It addresses the perpetual conundrum for observers, policymakers, and citizens alike: how to respond meaningfully to the visual and visceral witness of war's brutality, whether in experiencing it through news cycles, humanitarian reports, or the haunting photographs of artists like Don McCullin.<sup>105</sup> Sontag, contemplating photographs by McCullin, suggested that "for the alert conscience, there is no single, fully adequate response to atrocity or its images."<sup>106</sup> This highlights the moral nuance of witnessing conflict, as well as the limits of representation and challenges of translating empathy into persistent action. Yet awareness of this multiplicity should not immobilize action but strengthen our commitment to act together. As members of the world community, the way forward is to accept war's multicity of effects and share a common responsibility to limit them. This means not just aid to conflict resolution and humanitarian assistance but education, documentation, and public involvement, all of which contribute to a common memory that spurns indifference.

## CONCLUSION

War is no longer a geographically or temporally confined phenomenon. As your research powerfully illustrates, its reverberations extend across borders, disrupting global markets, triggering humanitarian crises, eroding ecosystems, and destabilizing political systems. The economic consequences of regional conflicts such as the war in Ukraine, or historical precedents like the Gulf War, have demonstrated how commodity prices, supply chains, and food security can be globally undermined by localized violence. Humanitarian displacement seen starkly in Syria's civil war has not only overwhelmed host nations but also fueled xenophobia and political polarization across continents. The environmental destruction wrought by armed conflict, from Agent Orange in Vietnam to oil spills in the Gulf, adds an often-ignored but long-lasting dimension of human suffering. Proxy wars further blur lines of accountability, increase escalation risks, and entrench instability, while photojournalism and cultural record-keeping, such as the work of Don McCullin, force global audiences to confront war's human cost. As articulated in the article, war is not just "with someone else," but by global interdependence by proxy, with all of us. This recognition demands not only reactive humanitarianism but proactive, coordinated global action.

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<sup>104</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (Penguin Books 2004) 64

<sup>105</sup> Don McCullin, *Shaped by War* (Jonathan Cape 2010) x-xii

<sup>106</sup> Sontag (n 5) 85

## **WAY FORWARD**

To meaningfully address war's invisible consequences, the international community must take a multipronged and long-term approach:

### **Strengthen Multilateral Legal Mechanisms-**

- Reinforce international humanitarian law enforcement through institutions like the ICC and ICJ.
- Codify stronger protections against environmental war crimes by revising provisions in the Rome Statute and Geneva Protocol I Article 55(1).
- Increase legal oversight of proxy warfare and arms transfers, aligning with UN Charter principles and the Arms Trade Treaty (2014).

### **Invest in Conflict Prevention and Early Warning-**

- Expand the UN's early warning systems and support initiatives like the Global Conflict Risk Index (GCRI).
- Prioritize preventive diplomacy and mediation support via UN Peacemaker or regional bodies like the African Union and ASEAN.

### **Empower Humanitarian Infrastructure-**

- Increase funding and operational autonomy for UNHCR, MSF, ICRC, and similar agencies.
- Guarantee humanitarian corridors and protections for aid workers through enforceable international protocols.
- Strengthen trauma-informed mental health services in conflict and host zones, especially for children and vulnerable groups.

### **Address Sociopolitical Fallout-**

- Launch civic education campaigns to counter xenophobia and polarization in host nations.

- Encourage public discourse grounded in empathy and cosmopolitan values, as emphasized by Martha Nussbaum in *Political Emotions* (2013).
- Implement integration policies that protect migrant rights while promoting social cohesion.

#### **Rehabilitate and Protect the Environment-**

- Mandate post-conflict ecological recovery plans (e.g., decontamination, reforestation).
- Support sustainable development programs in war-torn regions to restore food, water, and ecological security.
- Advance global frameworks linking climate resilience to peace building (e.g., UNEP's "Environment, Peace and Security" initiative).

#### **Centre Memory, Education, and Cultural Witness-**

- Fund museums, archives, and initiatives (like the IWM or McCullin's "Shaped by War") that humanize conflict and foster global empathy.
- Promote international curricula that teach the interconnectedness of conflict and the importance of peace.
- Encourage documentary storytelling and photojournalism that bear witness to the war's human cost.

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