

What \$25 Billion Spent on the War in Iran Really Means

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[...] Pentagon officials, mum for weeks on the cost of the war in Iran, have made their first public estimate: \$25 billion so far.

But what does a cost on that scale really mean?

Compared with past wars, and with the overall defense budget, \$25 billion may not seem like a large sum. Congress gave the Defense Department \$839 billion this year in normal appropriations and an extra \$150 billion as part of its big tax and domestic policy spending bill last summer. In 2008, the United States spent \$283 billion in a single year of war funding for the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts (in today's dollars).

But by almost any measure, the number is significant. It exceeds the annual budgets of numerous federal agencies. It amounts to around \$190 for every U.S. household. It means that, in two months of war, the Pentagon has spent down more than its annual budget for munitions.

And of course the war, now in a fragile cease-fire, is not over. "To state the obvious, \$25 billion is not the final bill," Travis Sharp, a senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, said in an email. "The tab is still open."

[...] This month, President Trump requested a record \$1.5 trillion in his annual military budget, a number vastly out of scale with these historical spending trends. Congressional appropriators are unlikely to adopt such a figure, but the request makes clear the president's priorities even as the American public has expressed opposition to the war and become preoccupied by economic issues at home. [...]

Missiles and bombs used to attack Iran — and jets that were destroyed in the region — were paid for long ago. When Pentagon officials talk about the cost of the war, they are largely describing what it would take to replace them. Jay Hurst, the acting Pentagon comptroller, said Wednesday that munitions had made up most of the war's cost so far.

Other war costs include extra funding for running overseas bases, and the price tag for fuel and logistics associated with moving ships, planes and service members around the world (especially at a time of high fuel costs). There will also be costs associated with repairing damaged military outposts.

So far, the Iran conflict has not involved a ground invasion. Wars involving large deployments of ground troops, such as in Iraq and Afghanistan, have cost much more.

The annual budget for government agencies like the F.B.I. and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is less than \$15 billion each. The war in Iran so far costs about the same as the annual budget for NASA, which just sent astronauts around the moon. It's also similar to the cost of expanding Obamacare subsidies — the policy proposal at the center of the extended government shutdown last year. Those subsidies, if they had been extended, would have cost an estimated \$30 billion this year.

Of course, the full costs of the war are not included in the Pentagon's estimate. Already 14 service members have died, according to Gen. Dan Caine, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. When the United States goes to war, service members also suffer physical and psychological injuries that lead to long-term health care and disability payments, which are primarily funded by the Department of Veterans Affairs. The Costs of War project, a scholarly group based at Brown University, has estimated that the post-9/11 wars will ultimately cost \$8 trillion, nearly four times the amount Congress set aside in supplemental military funding for those conflicts.

And those are just monetary costs.

"The costs of war," said Stephanie Savell, the group's director, "were much larger than the Pentagon's costs."