

# The Scope of Displacement: Reading the Watson Institute Working Paper

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Last week, a [working paper from the Watson Institute](#) at Brown University made a small stir in the immigration advocacy community. The paper's hook is that U.S. military interventions are responsible for huge numbers of displacements: "at least 37 million people have fled their homes in the eight most violent wars the U.S. military has launched or participated in since 2001." Its data derives from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), both considered high quality sources. As such, these findings should not be dismissed out of hand.

The Watson Institute paper's claim is large and important, which makes the paper is worth scrutinizing. The paper is also written in the norms of academic social science, which may be less familiar to some readers. This issue brief explains how to interpret and generalize academic research taking the Watson Institute paper as a case study. The Watson Institute paper partially substantiates its claims: it gives that U.S. military actions have precipitated the flights of more than 4.5 million refugees and 18 million displaced persons in total. That some claims are not adequately substantiated does not imply that the full claim—37 million people displace—is false. But as this brief will explain, the approach that the researchers take is one of several valid methods available.

## Methods and Methodology: How Does the Paper Make Its Case?

For academic writing, "methods" refer to the type or types of evidence gathered. An Ordinary Least Squares regression, qualitative interview, or archival sampling are all methods. Methodology refers to the theoretical relationship between the research question—here, something like "how many people have been displaced by U.S. wars?"—and the

method or methods used. Critiquing methods is useful when a paper contains math errors, when a reader suspects that interview questions prime participants to give a certain response, or similar issues. A situation where methods are imperfect, but methodology is robust, typically does not alter the validity or usefulness of a paper very much. However, problems in methodology cannot overcome even perfect use of methods.

The Watson Institute paper gathers broadly accessible data from publicly available sources for its methods to track displacement over time. The sources are UNHCR data on refugees, gathered from registrations, and a combination of UNHCR and IDMC estimates of the number of internally displaced persons, or IDPs. The IDP data carries a large amount of uncertainty because no comprehensive record of displacements exists. However, the data is more likely to undercount, even in an estimate, than to overcount, because national governments commonly try to hide the existence of IDPs. For the methods, there are small quibbles: (1) the data used tries to add a minimum figure gathered by census—registered refugees—to an estimate—the number of IDPs—to make its final count of displaced persons; and (2) the estimates of internally displaced people average two estimates that are dependent on each other, so the averaging is unnecessary. Both quibbles might change the overall findings, but not enough to undermine the overall point of the research.

Methodologically, the paper uses a temporal analysis with a case selection based on a US military role that either precipitates a conflict or that exacerbates a conflict:

"We focus on wars where the U.S. government bears a clear responsibility for initiating armed

combat (the overlapping Afghanistan/Pakistan war and the post-2003 war in Iraq); for escalating armed conflict (U.S. and European intervention in the Libyan uprising against Muammar Gaddafi and Libya's ongoing civil war and U.S. involvement in Syria); or for being a significant participant in combat through drone strikes, battlefield advising, logistical support, arms sales, and other means (U.S. forces' involvement in wars in Yemen, Somalia, and the Philippines)."

The standard for case inclusion is any one of three criteria: (1) that the U.S. precipitated armed conflict; (2) that the U.S. exacerbated armed conflict in such a way as to prompt displacement; or (3) that the U.S. military participated significantly in the armed conflict considered.

This is a broad standard. An academic reader can infer standards about the first two points, although the paper would have been stronger to include more specific test. However, the paper does not define what it means for the United States to be "being a significant participant in combat," nor how to identify what involvements count as "significant." We will return to this point in the internal critique section below. It suffices to say that the lack of strong definition limits but does not disprove the paper.

### **Internal Critique: Does the Paper Apply its Standards Consistently?**

An internal critique evaluates whether the methods in a project are used consistently, rigorously, and correctly. Do the claims follow from the data and argumentation presented? But internal critique need not disprove a claim. An inconsistency in application or calculation error might limit the scope of a project and its findings. An underdefined part of the methodology might lead to the exclusion of some data and a smaller effect. However, internal critiques tend to shrink the useful parts of a paper, rather than rendering the whole project incorrect or incoherent.

The Watson Institute paper is open to a substantial internal critique. It sums displacement from eight

countries: Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, the Philippines, Somalia, Yemen in the entirety of their displacement crises, and portions of war-related displacement in Pakistan and Syria. From the three criteria for case selection, three countries fall into the first criterion of the instigation of armed conflict: Iraq, Afghanistan, and the subsequent spillover from the Afghanistan invasion into northern Pakistan. These three are supported by the paper's data. The second criterion of application applies to two countries: Libya and Syria. Neither of these cases is adequately supported by argumentation in the paper. Libya is simply asserted as an example, and the justification for the Syria example is poorly reasoned. Of the third criterion of "significant participant in combat," the cases are Somalia, the Philippines, and Yemen. The Somalia case is partially substantiated but includes displacement not generated by combat operations. The Philippines and Yemen cases are not justified by the paper.

### **External Critique: Are the Present Standards also the Right Standards to Apply?**

The second way to evaluate research claims is known as external critique. An external critique evaluates whether a project uses the right methods and right data to make its case, regardless of whether the project uses those methods correctly. Here, an external critique will look closely at whether the three criteria for case selection are appropriate. (An external critique would also look closely at the facts of the cases included, and might expand or further limit the findings, but that is beyond the scope of this brief.) An external critique might also ask whether the account of causation—how A leads to B—is accurate. Like an internal critique, most external critiques limit a claim.

In the Watson Institute paper, the precipitating-event standard for case inclusion is straightforward. There is a rigorous argument that the U.S. bears responsibility for the fallout from military action. Note that this is an accounting of responsibility, not an argument for whether interventions are justified or unjustified. The second standard, escalation, is

also justifiable, with limitations. A proper accounting under this standard would include only those displacements attributable to dynamics that resulted from U.S. involvement. In the Syrian case, it might be that U.S. involvement (and Russian, on the other side) created a qualitatively different set of displacement dynamics that would not have been possible otherwise. Note here that neither case included (Libya, Syria) was adequately justified within the paper; however, with a better argument, their inclusion could make sense. The third standard, “significant participant in combat,” is insufficient to make claims on responsibility. The paper’s text itself suggests that “in countries including Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia (related to the war in Yemen), South Sudan, Tunisia, and Uganda” could have been included, but does not sufficiently justify why the Philippines was included while the above were excluded. Moreover, the standard itself is questionable—similar to attributing World War II displacement to Mexico, which was a minor but active belligerent.

### **Conclusion: Reducing the Scope of Tremendous Displacement**

Based on the above, the Watson Institute paper makes a case that U.S. military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan have displaced 4,692,806 who registered as refugees and 18,238,524 displaced persons in total. (All figures are from the paper.) A forgiving reader might also add some of the displaced people in Somalia (up to 4,196,825 in total displacement) and Syria (up to 7,147,292 total displacement) but unlikely to include all of them.

However, a second question concerns causation. As the paper notes at the outset, causation for displacement is tricky because most displacements include multiple causes:

“In documenting displacement caused by the U.S. post-9/11 wars, we are not suggesting the U.S. government or the United States as a

country is solely responsible for the displacement. Causation is never so simple. Causation always involves a multiplicity of combatants and other powerful actors, centuries of history, and large-scale political, economic, and social forces. Even in the simplest of cases, conditions of pre-existing poverty, environmental change, prior wars, and other forms of violence shape who is displaced and who is not.”

The moral weight of the paper is that the United States bears responsible for the displacement. Again, this is not a moral case that the military interventions were justified or unjustified. Instead, it is an accounting that can inform a moral judgement.

At the same time, choosing a model for causation is itself a qualitative decision. The standard for academic rigor, in practice, is a *pro tanto* decision—that is, it suffices to explain why something has occurred. In a mundane example, the answer “I was thirsty” sufficiently answers the question “why did you go to the refrigerator and pour yourself orange juice?” Another example might require temperature as a threshold (“but why the fridge?”) or taste (“but why orange juice?”). The implicit problem is literally irresolvable. Individual academics prefer certain models over others, but the only way to maintain intellectual honesty is to be pluralist about the models. Thus, the academic standard is not “does this paper present the model for causation and moral responsibility that I subscribe to?” but rather “is the present model for causation and moral responsibility a valid model?” On that standard, the Watson Institute paper passes.