

Killing for Oil



“Of course it’s about oil, we can’t really deny that,”

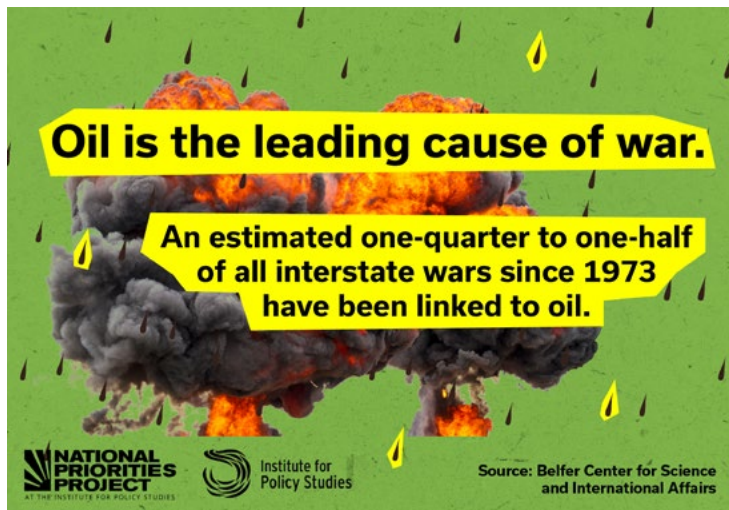
Gen. John Abizaid, former CENTCOM Commander³³

“Resource-extracting corporations operate behind military shields,”

Nnimmo Bassey, of Environmental Rights Action Nigeria and Chair of Oilwatch Africa³⁴

Why We Fight: The Struggle for Oil

Beyond accounting for fossil fuel consumption and greenhouse gas emissions, the U.S. military’s contributions to the climate crisis are even greater when considering what most military forces are mobilized for. The vast military infrastructure around the world is strategically positioned in oil- and resource-rich regions and along shipping lanes that



keep the fossil-fuel economy in operation around the globe. Oil is the leading cause of war; an estimated one-quarter to one-half of all interstate wars since 1973 have been linked to oil.³⁵ By far the greatest militarization has been in the Middle East, where more than half of the world’s oil reserves are located. The U.S. military spends an estimated \$81 billion a year to protect the world’s oil supplies—even before accounting for the Iraq war.

Climate Change is a “Threat Multiplier”

Climate change accelerates pre-existing crises. Described by the Pentagon as a “threat multiplier,” climate change makes already precarious social and political conditions worse. Climate change arrives in a grossly unequal world, and amplifies the crises of poverty and violence already impacting so many communities and regions of the world. Sociologist Christian [Parenti describes](#) this collision of crises as “the catastrophic convergence.”³⁶ According to the [2019 World Peace Index](#), “The effects of climate change pose a major challenge to peacefulness in the coming decade.”³⁷ That study estimates 971 million people live in areas with high or very high exposure to climate hazards. Of this, 400 million or 41% live in countries that already have low levels of peacefulness. As the climate crisis worsens, more ecological disasters and wars will continue to fuel mass migration.

The Complicated Web of Drought, Politics, and War in Syria

While a range of factors influenced the ongoing conflict in Syria, which began in March 2011, there is [empirical evidence](#) that climatic conditions played a significant role in exacerbating the conflict.³⁸ Likely caused by climate change, Syria experienced a severe drought between 2007 and 2010 that resulted in a dramatic reduction in groundwater supply. The prolonged drought conditions coupled with poor resource management policy led to multi-year crop failures, a dramatic increase in food prices, economic crisis, and the mass displacement and migration of rural farming families to urban areas. The rapid increase in urban population exacerbated unemployment and political unrest and helped trigger a civil war. [Researchers conclude](#) in the *Journal for Global Environmental Change*, “Climatic conditions, by affecting drought severity and the likelihood of armed conflict, played a significant role as an explanatory factor for asylum seeking in the period 2011-2015.”³⁹

Violent Responses to Dissent

In addition to causing war, the fossil fuel industry also relies on militarized state violence to uphold its operations around the globe. Those who fight to protect their lands from extractive industries and the infrastructure—like pipelines—used to bring oil, gas, and coal to market are often met with state and paramilitary violence. Land and environmental defenders are routinely intimidated, criminalized, and murdered. According to [data from Global Witness](#), more than three people were murdered on average each week in 2018—and even more criminalized—for defending their land and the environment.⁴⁰ This tally is almost certainly an undercount, as limited press freedom and other forms of information suppression results in some land and environmental defender deaths going unrecorded. Indigenous peoples are disproportionately subject to this violence. While Indigenous people make up about 5% of the world’s population, they [account for about a quarter of those murdered](#) for defending land and the environment.⁴¹



Branded as “eco-terrorists,” activists and everyday people protecting the well-being of their communities are often exposed to counterinsurgency operations that mirror the violent military tactics of war zones. In the [coal mining states of India](#), for example, Indigenous communities increasingly face exploitation and suppression of their basic rights as mining companies expand operations and evict Adivasi communities from their land. Those who peacefully resist human rights abuses face criminalization and suppression from mining companies and the Indian government. Another pertinent example is Brazil where new President Jair Bolsonaro was elected on a campaign [pledge to open Indigenous land for commercial development](#) like mining and agribusiness. This has already led to a [series of violent invasions](#) of Indigenous lands by armed bands of land grabbers.

Silencing Dissent in Guatemala

“They say we are terrorists, delinquents, assassins and that we have armed groups here, but really they’re just killing us,” Joel Raymundo, member of the Peaceful Resistance of Ixquis Movement⁴²

Latin America has the highest rate of murders of environmental and land defenders in the world. According to reporting by Global Witness, Guatemala was the world’s deadliest country per capita in 2018 for activists defending land and the environment. At least [sixteen activists](#) were murdered that year.⁴³ The crisis in Guatemala [stretches back decades](#), “When a long-running civil war ended in 1996, new economic integration policies opened the country to a boom in private and foreign investment.”⁴⁴ Violent land grabs and forced evictions disproportionately impacted Indigenous communities. In the decades that followed, industrial projects have been imposed without community consent and despite widespread opposition, including destructive mining and hydroelectric mega-projects on the ancestral land of the Ixquis people.

Resistencia Pacífica de la Microregión de Ixquis, Peaceful Resistance of the Microregion of Ixquis, was formed by Indigenous communities in response to human rights violations in Guatemala committed in the name of economic development. The group is often the target of violent retaliations. Members of the peaceful resistance group have suffered years of harassment and attacks from local police, soldiers, and company security guards. The violence escalated in 2018 when hundreds of armed police attacked community members during a demonstration against the dams, employing tear gas canisters and other projectiles against protestors. In December 2018 brothers Neri and Domingo Esteban Pedro were found dead near the San Andrés hydroelectric project with bullets in their heads. The brothers were both vocal opponents of the hydroelectric project, which is linked to one of Guatemala’s wealthiest and most powerful families and is also generously funded by international development banks.

Across Latin America, killings of environmental defenders often occur after individuals have been framed as criminals or terrorists through the legal system. In Guatemala, land and environmental defenders are targeted by both state and corporate forces with both physical and legal attacks to silence dissent. Meanwhile, despite well-documented accounts of the surge in attacks against environmental defenders, the state has failed to investigate or even acknowledge the problem. On the contrary, the [government is complicit](#) in the violence, publically referring to prominent environmental rights groups as criminal organizations.⁴⁵

Suppressing Dissent in the Land of the Free

In what is currently the United States, violent land dispossession and resource extraction have posed major threats to Indigenous sovereignty and survival. Indigenous territories have been exploited for nuclear weapons testing, to mine uranium, coal, and other metals, as sites for petroleum wells and pipelines, and as grounds to dump military toxic and radioactive waste. In almost all cases, such developments have not directly benefited Indigenous communities, but extracted wealth alongside resources. Indigenous resistance is met with harsh, often militarized, repression.

Recognition of such practices grew in 2016 when months of peaceful protest from Indigenous water protectors and their allies against the construction of the 1,172-mile Dakota Access Pipeline was met with a [heavy militarized police apparatus](#). Law enforcement agents, including local and out-of-state police and sheriff's deputies, Bureau of Indian Affairs police, and National Guard troops, used tear gas, rubber bullets, sound cannons, and water cannons in freezing temperatures against peaceful protestors.

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Some of this equipment [was likely obtained](#) through a Department of Defense program that gives riot gear, weaponized vehicles, and other military equipment to local police. This is the same system of military transfers, the 1033 program, that [armed police in Ferguson, Missouri](#) with assault rifles and armored vehicles and enabled an aggressive, militarized response to Black Lives Matter protests after the police killing of Black teenager Michael Brown. In addition to the 1033 program, other federal agencies including the Department of Homeland Security transfer surplus equipment and provide grants for equipment purchases to local police departments.

Policing Peaceful Protest in the U.S.

Local police in [at least five states collaborated](#) closely with private security firm TigerSwan, which originated as a U.S. military and State Department contractor, to target Indigenous resistance to the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL).⁴⁶ At the behest of its client Energy Transfer Partners, the company building the Dakota Access Pipeline, TigerSwan used military style counterterrorism measures to respond to the Indigenous-led movement against the pipeline. [Internal TigerSwan communications](#) compare anti-pipeline water protectors to “jihadist fighters” and warn, “While we can expect to see the continued spread of the anti-DAPL diaspora... aggressive intelligence preparation of the battlefield and active coordination between intelligence and security elements are now a proven method of defeating pipeline insurgencies.”⁴⁷

As policing continues to be militarized, state legislatures around the country increasingly criminalize dissent. Since 2016, [over 180 bills](#) have been introduced across the United States to restrict the right to peaceful assembly and suppress protest.⁴⁸ Considering these realities, and the fact that a Fortune 500 oil and gas company coordinated with law enforcement agencies to violently suppress the protest movement of water protectors, we should take seriously the potential for increased militarization in a climate-changed world.

An “Armed Lifeboat” Approach to Climate Security

In their 2014 Climate Change Adaptation Roadmap, [the DoD projected](#) that their “unique capacity to provide logistical, material and security assistance on a massive scale or in a rapid fashion may be called upon with increasing frequency.”⁴⁹ The report builds on previous DoD publications that characterize the effects of climate change as creating “[conditions that can enable terrorist activity and other forms of violence](#)” and outline plans to respond to the “security threats” associated with climate change through war-gaming scenarios.⁵⁰ Journalist Christian Parenti aptly describes such plans as an “[armed lifeboat](#)” approach to climate adaptation. On a violently unequal planet, the lifeboat attempts to keep the global elite afloat while those who are most impacted by climate change—including Black, Brown, Indigenous, and poor communities—are left off the lifeboat. As [Parenti explains](#), this sort of “climate fascism,” is “a politics based on exclusion, segregation, and repression.”⁵¹ Considering the violent tactics of U.S. militarism, it is troubling to imagine a future where the U.S. military is called on to address the destabilizing impacts of climate change. Particularly in the context where a bloated military budget leaves climate change mitigation and adaptation severely underfunded, the realities of a militarized response to climate change are not hard to imagine. A climate-changed world will certainly be less stable, but if we are to seek solutions that minimize harm and prioritize caring for each other then we must see through security frameworks that positions some needs and some lives as more worthy than others.

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