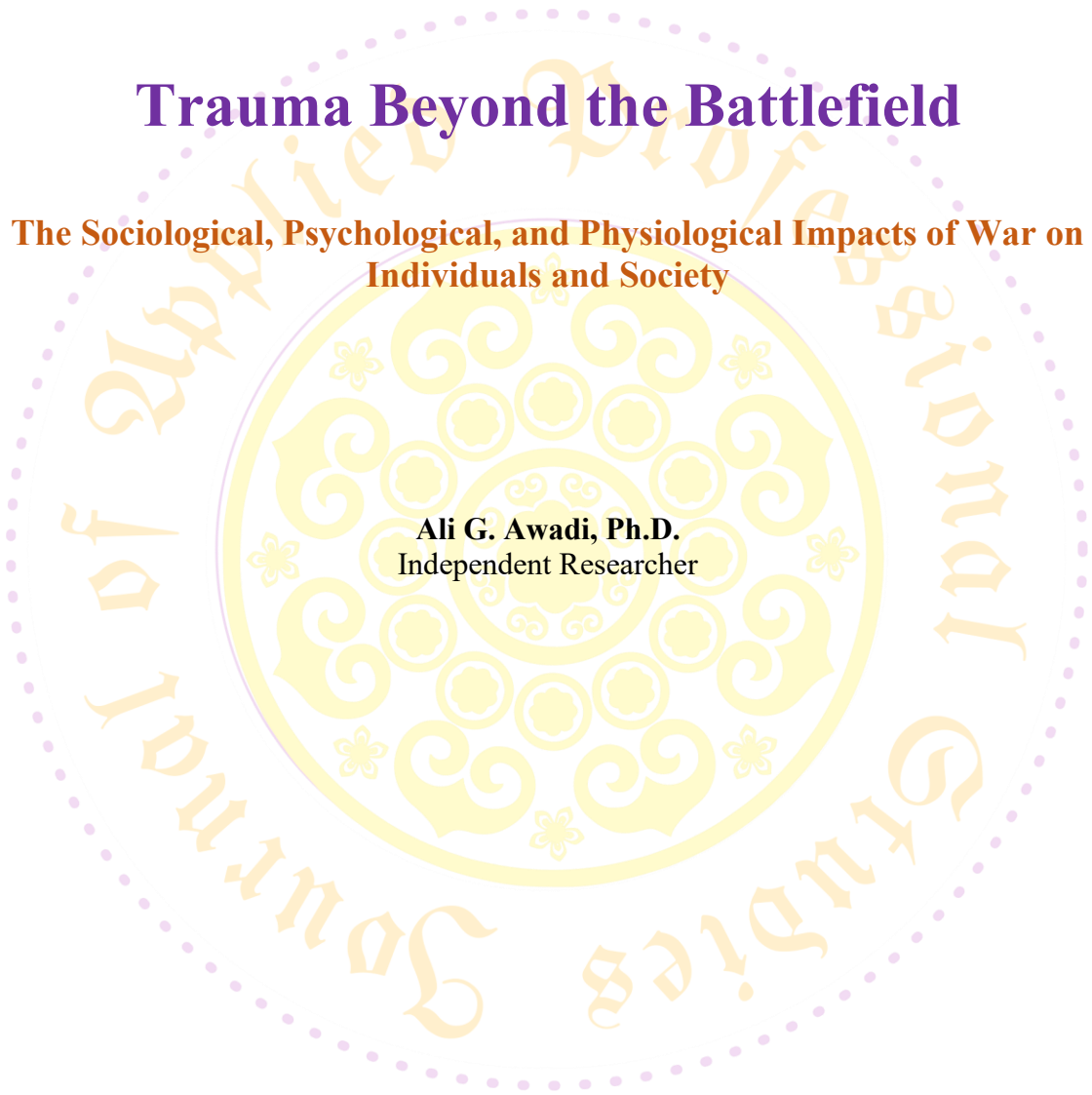


Trauma Beyond the Battlefield

The Sociological, Psychological, and Physiological Impacts of War on
Individuals and Society

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ABSTRACT

Warfare inevitably comes with repercussions that span across different sectors of society. Although political and economical ramifications tend to be at the forefront of post-war discussion, trauma and other psychological aftershocks of large scale violence can have lasting impacts that ripple through societies for years. With rising global tensions, researchers are beginning to place more emphasis on understanding how trauma from wars affect societal responses to violence. Fears of escalation and mass displacement were prevalent throughout the Middle East and members of diaspora communities that had ties to the region during the early stages of Iran-U.S.-Israel conflict in 2026. When the war began with airstrikes on Iranian missile facilities, it rapidly devolved into a multi-country conflict with long ranges missiles strikes, retaliatory raids, and growing civilian death tolls (UN, 2026). The prospect of escalation weighed heavily on civilian populations that either were in direct danger of violence or could empathize with victims through familial bonds, religious identity, or media exposure. While extreme anger, sadness, and sense of injustice can fuel radicalization or politically motivated violence in certain individuals, acts of violence stemming from overseas conflicts are fairly uncommon. On March 12th, 2026, one gunman attempted to open fire at a synagogue in West Bloomfield, Michigan in what was identified to be retribution for his family being killed in Israeli airstrike earlier that week (FBI-Detroit, 2026). However, in most instances, mass violence and international warfare can cause extensive psychosocial trauma that disrupts societies on a smaller scale. This paper aims to synthesize findings from sociology, psychology, neuroscience, and international conflict to understand how war and other forms of mass violence can impact mental health and social behavior.

INTRODUCTION

Warfare has played an important role in human history. Historians typically study war's aftermath in terms of territorial gains and losses, political upheaval, and economic instability. More recently, there has been an acknowledgement that perhaps the psychological and social effects of war are its most long lasting effects. Traumatic events like war can have long-term cognitive and emotional effects on individuals who experienced the violence.

The Iran-US-Israel War that started in early March 2026 serves as a recent example of events that can create large scale psychological distress. Military actions initially began with joint strikes by the US and Israel on Iran military bases. The conflict quickly escalated, with missile and drone attacks occurring in several countries (UN, 2026). Similar to many current conflicts, civilians are being affected by the violence via exposure to bombings, being displaced from their homes, and infrastructure damage.

There is strong evidence that war can have many negative psychological effects. People in war-torn regions have reported high levels of PTSD, depression, anxiety, and stress (Herman, 1992) (Neria, Nandi, & Galea, 2008) (van der Kolk, 2014). Oftentimes, this stress can be exacerbated by the uncertainty of information about the safety of loved ones.

War can also psychologically affect people who do not reside within warzone regions. As global connectivity continues to expand, diaspora populations often feel strong emotional and cultural connections to their familial and home countries that are involved in violence. Exposure to constant media coverage of the violence paired with communications with family living in these regions can take a toll on these individuals' mental states.

Trauma and grief caused by geopolitically based violence can lead to an increase in risk for violence given a particular set of circumstances. On March 12, 2026, there was an attempted attack at Temple Israel in West Bloomfield Township, Michigan. The attacker attempted to breach the synagogue but was stopped by security guards and responding police officers (FBI-Detroit, 2026). After further investigation, authorities discovered that the suspect had recently lost family members to Israeli airstrikes during current conflict in the Middle East (FBI-Detroit, 2026). Attacks like these raise one prominent sociological and psychological question. Does trauma caused by war affect how an individual socially behaves? If so, when will it cause retaliatory violence?

This paper takes as its central contention that traumatic harm arising from violent conflict simultaneously occurs on physiological, psychological, and sociological dimensions. Bodily stress responses, affective responses to trauma, and social narratives of violence may be mutually constitutive processes shaping identity, political beliefs, and behavior (Erikson, 1976) (McEwen, 1998) (Galtung, 1969). Elucidating these relationships provides insight into the pathways through which warfare can continue to impact societies long after the fighting has stopped, often far from its original location.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Traumatic stress can be understood from the standpoint of biology, psychology, and sociology. From a biological perspective, trauma induces stress responses. The Hypothalamic pituitary adrenal axis controls the release of stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline (McEwen, 1998). When faced with mortal danger our body kick into gear by releasing stress hormones which help us to fight or flight. However, prolonged activation of the stress response system may produce long-term health consequences including cardiovascular disease, sleep disturbances, and immune dysfunction (Sapolsky, 2004).

Neuroscience also offers a biological perspective on understanding trauma. Research has shown that those who suffered from PTSD had increased activity in the amygdala and decreased hippocampus activity, which plays a role in regulating our emotions and memory (Bremner, 2006) (Rauch, Shin, & Phelps, 2006).

From a psychological perspective, we can look at how people make sense of and react emotionally to stressful events. Exposure to violence can cause individuals to experience PTSD symptoms like flashbacks, insomnia, numbing out, and fear (Herman, 1992) (van der Kolk, 2014).

In addition to these psychological reactions to trauma, people can also experience moral injury. Moral injury is defined as the psychological harm that people experience after being exposed to a violation of their moral belief system (Litz, et al., 2009). Wars are often filled with events that make individuals feel angry, guilty, betrayed, and morally offended.

While much of trauma research focuses on the individual experience, we can also understand trauma from a sociological perspective. Trauma can alter group processes and identities. The term collective trauma was first used by Kai Erikson to describe how disasters can affect the connective tissue that holds a society together (Erikson, 1976). Wars and violence do not just affect individuals they share a whole community's identity and can alter collective political views.

Classic sociological theories shed some more light on these mechanisms. Social solidarity is what Émile Durkheim considered critical for social stability. Norms and collective consciousness function to moderate individual impulses (Durkheim, 1897/2005). Chronic violence weakens these sources of social solidarity and leads to fragmentation of society.

French Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu describes how people internalize social structures through a process he calls habitus. Habitus are systems of durable, transposable dispositions shaped by life in social conditions (Bourdieu, 2020). When someone grows up in a violent society, they learn to expect certain things about power, protection, and how others will treat them. These assumptions guide subsequent actions.

Biological, psychological, and social mechanisms can intersect. Exposure to violence elicits strong feelings like grief, rage, or humiliation. When such emotions are embedded in collective or ideological narratives, they can fuel ongoing social violence.

However, here is the important part: trauma is not destiny. Most traumas do not lead to violence. Most trauma victims are not violent; but trauma can leave people vulnerable to larger political and social currents. By understanding how these currents operate, we can understand how the effects of war reach far beyond the battlefield to affect social practices at all levels of society.

HISTORY OF TRAUMA RESEARCH

Trauma research began with war trauma. During WWI doctors started to notice that soldiers were coming back with different symptoms following combat. Symptoms of shell shock included trembling, numbness, nightmares, and lack of concentration (Young, 1995). Doctors believed these soldiers were showing neurological symptoms as a result of concussions to the brain from explosions near them.

Years later medical professionals started to believe that many of the symptoms that veterans were showing had to do with psychological processes. After World War II books started to show longer

lasting emotional reactions to trauma, Kardiner and Spiegel (1947) discovered that veterans who experienced combat would develop psychological symptoms decades later.

Diagnostic PTSD being named and added to the DSM was a huge advancement for trauma research (APA, 1980). This allowed clinicians and researchers to have a baseline of what symptoms to look for when diagnosing someone who has experienced trauma. There was now a way to measure if someone was affected by trauma or not. Research began to look at trauma that people experienced during their everyday life outside of combat including natural disasters and sexual assault.

PSYCHOLOGICAL REACTIONS TO EXPOSURE TO WAR

Data gathered from war affected areas has discovered a correlation between war exposure and mental illness. People living in war zones are more likely to have higher levels of depression, anxiety, and PTSD (Neria, Nandi, & Galea, 2008). Exposure to war can cause civilian populations to develop chronic emotional distress due to violence, displacement, and loss of family.

Children are one of the groups most impacted by violence during war. Studies have shown that children who are exposed to violence are at a higher risk for developing behavioral problems, acting out aggressively, and dissociation (Betancourt & Khan, 2008). War trauma can alter the way children process their emotions and make them more vulnerable to psychological distress.

Meta-analysis studies have discovered similar results when studying large samples of war exposed individuals. Steel et al. (2009) conducted a meta-analysis on mental health outcomes of individuals who experienced trauma related to war. They discovered there to be high levels of PTSD and depression throughout all populations.

BIOLOGICAL REACTIONS TO TRAUMA

Trauma can negatively affect our mental health, but it also causes us to change biologically. When we are introduced to a large stressor, we activate our hypothalamic pituitary adrenal axis. The HPA axis manages hormonal changes when we view something as threatening (McEwen, 1998). Short increments of this reaction allow us to handle dangerous situations. But if the reaction continues to activate it can be damaging to us.

Research in neuroscience has found that people who have been exposed to traumatic events have a higher activity in the amygdala. The amygdala is what processes fear in the brain. They also found a lower activity in the prefrontal cortex. The prefrontal cortex is what allows us to cognitively control our emotions (Rauch, Shin, & Phelps, 2006).

Studies have also found that people with PTSD have alterations to the volume of their hippocampus (Bremner, 2006). This may affect how we process memories if we experience trauma.

WAR, COLLECTIVE TRAUMA, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL STRESS

War can cause trauma on a community level as well. Collective trauma refers to psychological reactions to a traumatic event that affects larger communities and societies. Sociologist Kai Erikson first introduced the theory of collective trauma. He stated that these traumatic events affect the “social bonds that connect people together and give society its strength” (Erikson, 1976).

When a community is exposed to war or violence, they tend to demonstrate less social trust, increased political polarization, and overall lower stability in governmental institutions. Social trust is one of the foundational aspects of a community because it allows people to interact with each other freely. When communities lose trust, they tend to become more close minded and believe into narratives of us vs. them.

Conflict between nations can induce these types of perspectives, especially if there is a loss of social trust. Another theory that applies to trauma on a social level is structural violence. Structural violence is defined as a social structure that does not allow individuals to meet their basic human needs (Galtung, 1969). Oftentimes war can exacerbate these issues, which leads to more structural violence.

TRAUMA AND IDENTITY: PSYCHOLOGICAL STRESS ON DIASPORA’S

In today’s world wars can affect people who are not near the location where the war is taking place. With advances in communication technology and the ability to move around the world, many people from all over the world feel strong ties with their nationality. Violence that occurs to these people’s home countries can trigger stress or trauma.

This kind of trauma faced by individuals that deeply identify with their nationality is called secondary trauma or secondary traumatic stress. Secondary trauma occurs when people experience stress or symptoms of trauma by empathizing with victims (Figley, 1995).

Diaspora’s can experience secondary trauma by communicating with someone from their home country who encountered the traumatic event. Not only can they can experience trauma through social interactions but also through TV, movies, and social media. Just by looking at a picture or watching videos of people from their hometown can cause them to feel empathetic distress.

Similar to how someone who actually experienced the trauma would feel there are many symptoms that someone with secondary trauma might experience. Some of these symptoms include anxiety, intrusive thoughts, sadness, and helplessness.

Social identity can play a factor into how someone experiences secondary trauma. Social identity theory suggests that people perceive themselves as coming from a social group (Tajfel, Turner, Austin, & Worchel, 2001). Nationality, ethnicity, religion, or any other collective group a person identifies with can be used to identify these social groups.

In a society with multiple collective groups, these emotions can cause tension between groups who may have different views on the conflict. These different views can cause each group to feel like

the other group does not understand how they feel or is victimizing them too. Understanding secondary trauma can help us understand how international conflicts can impact everyone involved, not just those at the center of it.

MEDIA EXPOSURE AND SECONDARY TRAUMA

The global media culture influences how we view conflict. Wars, terrorist attacks, and humanitarian disasters are brought into homes around the world through media coverage. People are able to see violence that they would not have been exposed to in previous centuries.

Constant viewing of these images can have effects on people who are not directly involved in the conflict. Studies have shown that chronic exposure to media violence can lead to trauma like symptoms such as increased anxiety, intrusive thoughts, and feeling emotionally drained (Figley, 1995). Frequent exposure can also lead to numbness. As people become accustomed to seeing violence through the media, they may become numb to it emotionally.

Media can also cause people to become more accepting of violence as a way of life.

However, media can also cause people to have strong emotional feelings about violence if they feel that they have a connection to the conflict. If someone has family or cultural ties to a place where violence is occurring, they may feel stronger negative emotions when they see media about the conflicts affecting that region. Social media has compounded these effects by facilitating direct interaction with conflict-related information. Images, videos and personal narratives can spread quickly through social media channels, heightening emotional reactions to events happening far away.

TRAUMA, ANGER, AND THE BEHAVIORAL PATHWAY TO VIOLENCE

As we discussed previously trauma can cause emotions like fear, sadness, and grief. Trauma can also lead to intense emotions of anger and resentment. Anger can play a role in how someone may choose to act.

Anger is also commonly felt when someone believes that a specific person or group of people is to blame for their pain. When someone perceives the cause of their trauma to be unjust they may feel emotions such as moral outrage. They may also feel as though revenge should be enacted.

Political Violence experts have recognized that feelings of injustice can play a large role in causing someone to turn to violence. A person who perceives that they have been wronged may create a storyline that they should fight back against the people who caused them harm (Horgan & Horgan, 2004).

Humiliation is another feeling that can cause someone to lash out in violence. If someone has been traumatized in a way that caused them to feel as though their pride was hurt, or their social ranking was taken from them. They may feel anger or resentment towards those who they perceive as responsible. Studies have shown that if someone feels humiliated they are more likely to respond with aggression (Gill, Horgan, & Deckert, 2014).

It is imperative to note that trauma does not cause someone to become a violent actor. Many people who experience trauma will never lash out. Out of the combination of experiences, storylines, social group, and perceived ability to act some people decide that violence is an option. The interaction between anger caused by trauma and social factors can help us understand how that violence comes about.

RESILIENCE FOLLOWING TRAUMA

War can have severe psychological effects on individuals, but studies have found that humans can recover from trauma. A person can experience the most horrific event and function in a war-stricken society. Trauma can impact someone emotionally and physically for the remainder of their life. However, most people will recover and return to their normal functioning.

Humans recovering from trauma does not mean that they did not suffer because of the traumatic events that they experienced. Traumatic events can impact anyone's ability to function; resilience is when you are able to bounce back from those events. Someone being resilient does not mean they will not feel distress. Most people feel relieved after a traumatizing event once they have had time to recover and learn how to live life after trauma (Bonanno, 2004).

Social support can help people recover from traumatic events. When you have healthy attachments with others you can have your feelings and thoughts validated. Family, friends, and other kin can provide that validation for you. They can reassure you that what your feeling is normal and offer to help you if you need it. Individuals with support from others are less likely to face mental disorders later in life (Southwick, Bonanno, Masten, Panter-Brick, & Yehuda, 2014).

Your culture can influence how you recover from trauma as well. Religious gatherings, mourning practices, and coming together as a community can allow your village to heal together. If your community keeps these traditions going post violence or trauma they can nurture feelings of togetherness during your recovery.

Your personal outlook on life can influence your ability to recover from traumatic events. If you can find the silver lining in every situation, control your emotions, and adapt to new thoughts you may experience growth. Post-traumatic growth allows people to psychologically grow from the difficult times they faced (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Community resilience can be promoted by holding your local institutions accountable to what you value as a community. Creating democratic practices, mental health care, and education can allow your community to flourish after violence. It is important to understand resilience when trying to help trauma struck communities. If you only focus on the negative parts of war you fail to see the community's ability to recover from these events.

PREVENTION AND TRAUMA INFORMED POLICY APPROACHES

Trauma informed violence prevention can even come in the form of policy change. There should be more effort to allow for better mental health resource access. Individuals who encounter trauma can go without the necessary professionals or resources that focus on mental health. There are

some people who simply cannot afford counseling or other resources to aid in their mental health if they are victims.

According to the World Health Organization, meeting mental health needs should be a priority when working with trauma related to conflict (WHO, 2023). Some services can include trauma informed counseling as well as providing access to community health services and groups when possible.

Community violence prevention is something that can also help reduce the negative impacts of war. Organizations that allow for productive conversation between groups in conflict can help mediate their differences. Part of violence prevention is including mediation and relationship building. Community members should learn how to healthily express their anger and resentment towards each other.

Schools should include violence prevention to help students curtail negative outbursts of anger and aggression. If children and teens are taught how to control their emotions and calm down from conflicts, they will know how to better handle situations that could turn violent. Schools can include violence prevention programs to teach kids how to positively communicate with other students and resolve their conflict. Prevention can even be applied to news stations and outlets.

Humans can experience negative effects from continuously watching graphic images and videos of violence. News stations should change how they report information to help prevent public desensitization. There can also be prevention efforts on an international scale. Foreign policy can encourage worldwide prevention of trauma and violence.

CONCLUSION

War and extreme violence impact more than just those in the combat zone. Exposure to violence can impact your biological stress response systems as well as mental health and even your relationships with others. Biological, psychological, and social factors can influence how survivors of armed conflict behave.

In this paper we learned how trauma can impact us on biological, psychological, and sociological levels. Trauma can trigger biological processes in our bodies that could lead to negative health outcomes. Trauma can cause psychological symptoms such as fear, sadness, anger, and moral injury. Trauma can also have sociological consequences by changing how we identify with members of our group, our political ideology, and even how we behave with others.

Understanding trauma on these different levels can help us see how trauma can influence how survivors of violence and war may behave. But just because someone is traumatized does not mean that they will automatically become violent. If someone is psychologically traumatized and experiencing PTSD, they may be more likely to support or use violence if other social and ideological factors influenced them.

This is why this topic is so important and interesting to me. We have to look at the psychological and social aspects together to understand how war impacts people. This topic also makes us look

at research from an interdisciplinary perspective. Not only can we use studies from sociology, psychology, and neuroscience but we can look at studies from related fields like public policy. We can use this information to push for trauma informed policy change and increase the availability of mental health services to help communities heal after violence and prevent it from happening in the future.

Authors Note

These are all reasons why we as Americans should care when America negatively impacts other societies and communities around the world. Just like trauma can cause negative downstream effects on communities exposed to violence in society, so can America's actions affect other communities worldwide. Violence and trauma can destroy the physical infrastructure of communities, but they often leave long-lasting psychological impacts as well.

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