



ASSESSING THE FAILURES OF U.S. 'WAR ON TERROR' 17 YEARS AFTER 9/11

Special Report



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Seventeen years after 9/11, the outcome of the War on Terror is still in dispute. With the menace of ISIS viciously fought and defeated by a network of allies, rumours of its accruing resurgence, a reformed Al-Qaeda operating across the Middle East and threatening to spill over to South Asian territory, terrorism has more followers now than it did before 2001. Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan have become axiomatic with large scale destruction, devastation, loss of human life and hatred amongst affected millions of affected communities are likely to fuel a fresh crop of frustrated citizens who find solace in the idea of an all-out Jihad against who they see as perpetrators of their injustice.

While 2001 saw only the monopoly of Al-Qaeda – (loosely translated as ‘The Fundament’) and the bogey of its founder Osama Bin Laden dominate counterterrorism efforts of the West, the Islamic State overshadowed its patron in 2014, creating the legacy of a new wave of terrorism comprising of ideological and physical domination of territory.

It is clear that the so-called ‘War against Terrorism’ is not working.

To critics of American foreign policy post 9/11, the problem lies in the persistent tendency to view the threat of jihadism through the post-2001 prism. The attacks in New York and Washington, D.C. more than a decade ago still shape the way both policy makers and experts on jihad approach the subject. But political scientists take the view that the threat of extremism today is better understood through events that took place after 2011, when the Arab Spring and its aftermath overturned the established order in the Middle East and North Africa, and with it the subverted the concept of ‘extremism’ as was known previously.

After the attacks of 9/11, terrorism took center stage in national security policy and the limited-response approach gave way to a far more aggressive and expansive strategy that the Bush administration in 2003 called the “4-D” strategy. Encouraged by perceived early success in promoting democracy in Afghanistan, President Bush frequently articulated his conviction that America had a ‘responsibility’ to liberate people.

The visceral response to the threat of terrorism, however, recalls the Bush administration’s answer to 9/11 — the invasion of Iraq, the embrace of torture

and unlawful detention, the curtailment of civil liberties — that deeply damaged America’s standing in the world and hamstrung U.S. efforts to fight terrorism.

Enter Presidential Elect Donald Trump in 2016. Washington based analysts expressed their grave reservations about the President elect and what they perceived as his single-minded focus on the danger he claims is posed by “radical Islam” — a threat he compared during his election run to that represented by Nazi Germany in World War II, conflating urgently the idea of ‘international terrorism’ and so-called global threats as a danger to the American soil. One Foreign Policy editorial read soon after his election warned:

‘President-elect Donald Trump’s choices for his national security team would return 9/11-era policies to the White House and back an all-out war on Islamist terrorists that will alarm U.S. allies, raise the risk of confrontation with Iran, and potentially jeopardize civil liberties at home...’

Today there is consensus in Washington and globally that the War on Terror failed. This failure has two fundamental—and related—sources. The first is the inflated assessment of the terror threat facing the United States, which led to an expansive counterterrorism campaign that did not protect Americans from terrorist attacks. The second source of failure is the adoption of an aggressive strategy of military intervention.

Counterterrorism experts warned as far back as 2016 that Trump and his planned national security team were at the danger of playing into the hands of Islamic State propaganda, which sought to portray its cause as a struggle for Islam. Trump’s then pick to run the CIA, Mike Pompeo, famously linked preceding President Obama’s torture reforms – an attempt to humanize war victims in jails by disavowing from torture mechanisms- with what he believed to be a ‘weak approach’ to the war on terror. As was evident a year into his Presidency, Trump’s own vocal statements on banning Muslim immigrants, maintaining the Guantánamo military prison, and an obsession with ‘bombing the hell out of” Islamic State recruitment efforts meant that US foreign policy remained steadily reactive, not pro-active to the threats and Jihadist groups that were constantly evolving their own strategies.

Today, the staggering costs of the War on Terror have far outweighed the benefits. A recent study by Neta Crawford at Brown University puts the cost of the War on Terror (both money spent to date and required for future veterans’ benefits) at roughly \$5 trillion.

The 'War' itself has gained the status of a phenomenon, explained not by facts or figures of threats but by a loose conglomeration of a set of repetitive practices employed by the West in the past 17 years since 9/11.

Political theorist Richard Jackson has argued that because the requirements for America's 'war on terrorism,' have been so diffuse and inarticulated, the war is now best explained in terms of a simultaneous set of actual practices—wars, covert operations, agencies, and institutions—and an accompanying series of self-created assumptions, beliefs, justifications, and narratives— that Washington employs to appease its domestic populations.

Regardless of the definition of the 'war' used, however, any assessment of a failing US counterterrorism policy today should answer the critical question of whether the United States has actively reduced the terror threat since 9/11.

Even by a conservative accounting, the War on Terror has been a failure. First, although the United States has not suffered another major terrorist attack since 9/11, there is no proof that intervention abroad had anything to do with that, despite killing thousands of terrorist group members. Nor has the War on Terror on a domestic level made its population appreciably safer than they were before 9/11, in part because as policymakers argue - Americans were already exceptionally safe and in part because, again, offensive counterterrorism efforts have had little or no connection to the rate of terrorism in the U.S. homeland. Rather, it has been the US's repeated forays into international conflicts and aggressive invasions of territories that has elevated anti-American sentiment globally. Second, the United States has not destroyed or defeated al Qaeda, the Islamic State, or any other terror groups of global reach, nor has it made a dent in diminishing the underlying conditions supposed to give rise to terrorism. A recent study argued that the number of Islamist-inspired terror groups has proliferated since the War on Terror began. Moreover, the number of terror attacks worldwide has skyrocketed, indicating that the conditions driving the use of terrorism are very likely worse than ever.

There has been a considerable lapse in the way US counterterrorism policy approached its subjects.

Firstly, counterterrorism expert Hassan Hassan argues that the modus operandi of the threat i.e. the jihadists have has changed beyond recognition since the advent of the first Al-Qaeda Jihadists in 2001. But the US has failed to take these changes into account;

“After 2011, a lot changed. Jihadis became grounded in local reality... it is no longer adequate to understand what jihadis stand for or what their guiding principles are, much less what drives the groups in which they operate. Policy makers and observers will now find deep knowledge of the geography; demography; and the political, economic, and social circumstances that might fuel and sustain a conflict more useful than knowing whether a person is more influenced by Maqdisi than Azzam.”

Even today credit for the revival or any potential resurgence of al-Qaeda should not be given to its premier Ayman al-Zawahiri or his aides, who led the organization after bin Laden. Instead, experts consistently argue that the resurgence of both Al-Qaeda and the success of ISIS in the past decade, particularly after the Arab Spring was in fact dependent upon local insurgents who built local organizations, relying more on their understanding of local dynamics than on instructions from ‘a cave far away.’ In fact research of the group’s activities over the past decade has shown that these local sub groups would begin to function independently if disagreements ever sprung between them and the parent organization leadership.

While it is accepted that the post-2001 campaign by the West against Jihadist groups managed to establish some financial, political, and military norms that prepared and equipped regimes to contain the rise of jihadi groups.

But these measures have now outlived their usefulness.

As Hassan Hassan wrote – “Jihadis no longer speak to communities from the ivory tower of vanguard ideas. They are fighting the local fight, and that has enhanced their relevance and bred success. Combatting the threat, they pose will require taking a similarly local, approach.”

Second, a careful reading of the lessons from the past 15 years indicates that the United States should abandon its existing ‘military’ strategy in the Middle East. Military intervention and nation building efforts, even at current “light footprint” levels by the Trump regime (as witnessed in Libya, Syria, Iraq), cause more problems than they solve, including spawning more anti-American sentiment and creating, rather than diminishing, the conditions that lead to terrorism.

Third, in contrast to the dire picture painted by many observers, including President Trump, the terrorism threat is now too multifaceted and runs on an

ideological spectrum to justify either the existing strategy or more military intervention.

One important lesson that the Trump regime should take from 9/11 is that its counterterrorism policy continuing from the same lens is now defunct. Terrorist activities leading to the attacks were not just a story about one country, rather the threat even then was a multi-enterprise activity with a global network of deeply connected operatives. The US underestimated this narrative and instead went on a barrage of military invasions in states such as Afghanistan, pursuing objectives that are unwinnable at the marginal cost it is willing to pay.

Furthermore, it is manifestly clear that the US can no longer afford to use the garb of a War against 'terror' to mask pursuing its own longstanding policy objectives.

Since President Trump's election, US military misadventures in Iraq's Raqqa region, (where fear of Russian military hegemony in the Middle East prompted US invasion) for instance are only second to the devastating numbers of civilian casualties coming out of Yemen. The US has been supporting Saudi-led coalition against the Houthis for two years. While, the Obama administration sold the Saudis over \$20 billion worth of arms, the Trump administration earlier this year approved a \$110 billion arms deal with Saudi Arabia.

A study by Jessica Stern (Harvard) and Meghan K. McBride (Brown) found that our military presence in Iraq did not quell the number of terror attacks in the region, but increased their frequency substantially. There is a positive correlation occurring here.

This is the caveat that US foreign policy has either deliberately or unintentionally missed - Terrorism thrives in chaos, it often rises in unstable regions decimated by war.

America's default setting has become perpetual war. Actions within this system can, at times, provide a quick fix in terms of surface-level wins, but there is no end game here.

War begets war begets war.

Western militaries, particularly, the US and Britain keep painstaking records of its soldiers killed in both Afghanistan and Iraq Yet, they have never tried to

make an overall tally of Iraqi civilian deaths or those killed in other theatres since its War on Terror.

Millions of civilian casualties by US military adventures in Pakistan and other places where the “war on terror” has played out – Afghanistan, Mali, Niger, Somalia, and Philippines – are yet to be accounted for.

America and more pertinently, the incumbent Trump regime must now rethink their own notions of War on Terror. In seeking to keep the page of history from turning to a chapter beyond the American century, the United States would do well to take a leaf out of its own book and not repeat its redundant counterterrorism practices, acclimatize itself with the new phase of ideological threats and formulate a policy of nation building and capacity development in host states, so that the rise of potential anti-West sentiments in these conflict zones do not fuel the rise of another anti-US enemy – legitimate in its anger and hatred - in its wake.