

9/11: Twenty Years On

Summary: America's debacle in Afghanistan began with a surprise attack that launched a never-ending 'war on terror'.

This Saturday is the twentieth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania that left 3000 dead and sparked the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. The attacks changed US foreign and security policy overnight and within weeks the UK was onside. The "Global War on Terror" (GWOT) had begun.

A traditional war has a beginning, middle and an end, but the GWOT, it soon became clear, was not going to be like that. Rather, it was more like the war on crime or drugs: shape shifting, ubiquitous and endless, not just one war, but a series of related asymmetric conflicts taking place on many fronts simultaneously across the Muslim world. "Our enemy is a radical network of terrorists and every government that supports them" [said](#) President Bush on Sept 20, 2001.

Twenty years on, the cost of the GWOT has become immense and mostly it has been borne by Arabs and Muslims. According to the latest report by Brown University's [Costs of War](#) project 900,000 U.S. military members, allied fighters, opposition fighters, civilians, journalists and humanitarian aid workers have been killed so far as a direct result of the GWOT, whether by bombs, bullets or fire. Of that number 7000 were US military and nearly 400,000 were civilians. Many more civilians died indirect deaths, by way of disease, displacement and loss of access to food or clean drinking water. The Institute for Policy Studies [says](#) the US has spent \$21 trillion on the GWOT over the 20 years, money that otherwise might have been spent on education, the environment and health. An estimated 37 million have also been [displaced](#), including 8 million refugees and asylum seekers and 29 million displaced within Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Pakistan, the Philippines, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen.

So 20 years on, was the GWOT worth it? And who won?

Proponents of the GWOT argue it is too early to answer these questions definitively but it was worthwhile taking on emerging terrorist groups. They point to the victories: the ISIS caliphate of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was defeated in 2019. Al Qaeda was swept from Afghanistan and the Taliban defeated in a matter of weeks in 2001. Osama Bin Laden was killed in 2011. There have been almost no further large-scale attacks by Al Qaeda since 9/11 and very few jihadi attacks on the US mainland.

But if success is measured in a decline in terrorism the GWOT has been worse than a failure because over the past 20 years the jihadi phenomenon has exploded out of all proportion. In 2001 it was restricted to a small handful of militant groups operating out of hideouts in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Today it has proliferated into dozens or hundreds of such groups around the world, better armed, financed and organised than ever before. Al Qaeda alone is currently active in Gaza, Sinai, the Maghreb, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, East Africa, the Indian subcontinent, and Kurdistan. It controls territory in Mali, Somalia, Syria, Yemen, and intermittently in Egypt. The Taliban are back in control of Afghanistan. ISIS remains a continuing threat in Syria and Iraq.

One unforeseen consequence of the GWOT was that through social media and modern communication technology Muslims living in the West could be influenced to commit Jihadi attacks anywhere, any time. This presented an impossible security problem because the West is full of Muslims and, despite all the money spent on homeland security and surveillance, no one, apparently, could find a way to distinguish between a devout and peaceful believer and a murderous fanatic. As a result London, Paris, Nice, Brussels and Manchester were all subjected to unprecedented terrorist attacks, and many non-Muslims decided that every Muslim was a potential terrorist. Islamophobia exploded, political campaigning descended into anti-Muslim bigotry, and trust between Muslim communities and Western establishments was badly eroded, further driving radicalisation.

Not only was this blowback unforeseen, a wilful misunderstanding about why the West was attacked in the first place crippled the US response from the very start.

The Jihadi movement was born in the Middle East out of a struggle for freedom, justice and self-determination in Saudi Arabia and Egypt. It draws most of its power not from great Islamic scholarship – bin Laden studied business – but grievances, which if addressed would strip it of all its power. Proponents of the GWOT argue 9/11 was an unprovoked attack by suicidal terrorists aimed at humiliating the West and undermining its values and democracy. However, as Ayman Al-Zawahiri and Osama bin Laden [explained](#) several times, the reason the US was targeted was because of its treatment of Arabs and Muslims in the region, because of US support for the occupation of Palestine and, above all, because of US support for the regime controlling Saudi Arabia.

Without this very basic understanding, many mistakes were made. Massive armies were deployed to fight a war of ideas with no locus. The invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq simply poured fuel on the fire and created more Jihadis. Like a judo wrestler who uses his opponent's weight against him, bin Laden led the US into a trap. Soon mission creep set in, driven by a potent mix of misguided idealism, Islamophobia, corruption and the military industrial complex. Back home, the public oscillated between wondering why we were engaged in foreign wars to forgetting all about them.

The question about what constitutes a legitimate jihad is entirely the responsibility of the Muslim world. The West has no role in this debate besides doing what it can to give moderate Muslims the encouragement and tools they need to influence those of their fellow Muslims who may be drifting to violence toward a less radical ideology. This is best done by upholding and defending universally accepted values, norms, and principles of modern civilization.

The GWOT has done just the opposite. Instead of universal values it introduced Abu Ghraib, black sites, extraordinary rendition and Guantánamo Bay. It saw Western governments double down on exactly the same Arab regimes that caused the jihad phenomenon in the first place. The influential moderate Muslims in MENA who could have been speaking up against Jihad were all executed or jailed, while the occupation of Palestine spread. The irony is that, as was the case with slavery, the majority of thoughtful people in the West have absolutely no interest in war or occupation in Muslim lands and regard the Arab dictatorships Western governments choose to support as beyond the pale.

One might think that after Afghanistan the chances of another Western military intervention in the Arab or Muslim world had passed. But that may not necessarily be the case. On Monday US Senator Lindsey Graham [said](#) he expects the US will return to Afghanistan in the future. Last week President Biden [promised](#) despite the recent US withdrawal America will “maintain the fight against terrorism in Afghanistan and in other countries.”

As long as the GWOT continues, and the root causes of Jihadist extremism go unaddressed, the more Jihad will spread. For many young Arabs in the Middle East dreaming of freedom and self-determination, the picture is now clear: freedom is not given, it is taken. If you fight like the Taliban and Hamas, you can make tangible gains, but participate in the democratic process like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and you will be destroyed, even if you win. As Mao Zedong said, “Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun”.

Twenty years on from 9/11 the winners of the GWOT are the Taliban and other militant Islamist groups, along with Arab autocrats in countries such as Egypt, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and UAE. Winners too are the autocratic opponents of the West globally including China, Russia and Iran. The other big winner is the military industrial complex for whom an endless war on terror is simply very good business.

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