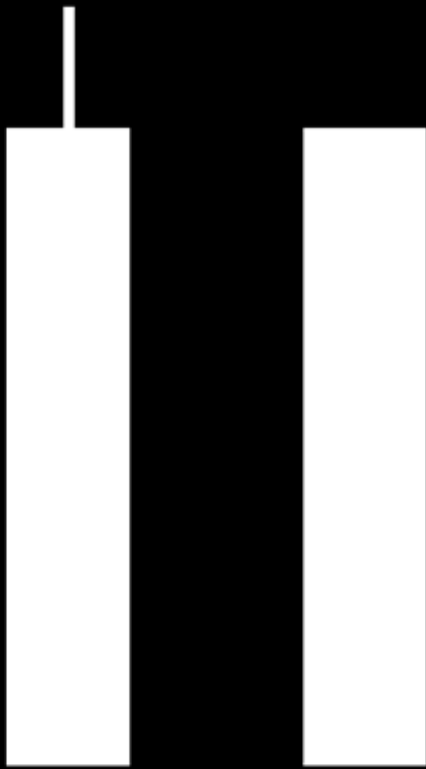


360° Series



SEPTEMBER 11TH

360° Series

Fair Observer



9/11 and the War on Terror

Fair Observer | 237 Hamilton Ave | Mountain View | CA 94043 | USA
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International Standard Serial Number (ISSN): 2372-9112

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How 9/11 and the War on Terror Shaped the World

Atul Singh & Anna Pivovarchuk
September 8, 2021

The attacks of 9/11 not only shocked the world, but the images of planes crashing into the World Trade Center came to define a generation. This 360° context looks at 20 years of the war on terror.

On September 11, 2001, 19 militants associated with the Islamist terrorist group al-Qaeda hijacked four planes and launched suicide attacks on iconic symbols of America, first striking the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York and then the Pentagon. It would be the deadliest act of terrorism on American soil, claiming nearly 3,000 lives.

The attacks not only shocked the world, but the images of planes crashing into the World Trade Center came to define a generation. In a speech on October 11, 2001, then-President George W. Bush spoke of “an attack on the heart and soul of the civilized world” and declared “war against all those who seek to export terror, and a war against those governments that support or shelter them.” This was the start of the global war on terror.

The Story of the 9/11 Attacks and Retaliation

Osama bin Laden, the Saudi leader of al-Qaeda, inspired the 9/11 attacks. Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, a Pakistani Islamist terrorist and the nephew of the truck driver convicted for the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, masterminded the operation. The 9/11 Commission Report described al-Qaeda as “sophisticated, patient, disciplined and lethal.” It held that the enemy rallied “broad support in the Arab and Muslim world.” The report concluded that al-Qaeda’s hostility to the US and its values was limitless.

The report went on to say that the enemy aimed “to rid the world of religious and political pluralism, the plebiscite, and equal rights for women,” and observed that it made no distinction between military and civilian targets. The goal going forward was “to attack terrorists and prevent their ranks from swelling while at the same time protecting [the US] against future attacks.”

To prosecute the war on terror, the US built a worldwide coalition: 136 countries offered military assistance, and 46 multilateral organizations declared support. Washington began by launching a financial war on terror, freezing assets and disrupting fundraising pipelines. In the first 100 days, the Bush administration set aside \$20 billion for homeland security.

On October 7, 2001, the US inaugurated the war on terror with Operation Enduring Freedom. An international coalition that included Australia, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Japan, the UK and other countries, with the help of the Northern Alliance comprising various mujahedeen militias, overthrew the Taliban, which was sheltering al-Qaeda fighters, and took over Afghanistan.

The war on terror that began in Afghanistan soon took on a global focus. In 2003, the Bush administration invaded Iraq despite the lack of a UN mandate. Washington made the argument that Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein was developing weapons of mass destruction, represented a threat to world peace, and harbored and succored al-Qaeda and other Islamic jihadists. None of this proved to be true. Hussein’s regime fell as speedily as Mullah Omar’s Taliban.

Victory, however, was short-lived. Soon, insurgency returned. In Afghanistan, suicide attacks quintupled from 27 in 2005 to 139 in 2006. Globally, the war on terror saw a “stunning” rise in jihadist activity, with just over 32,000 fighters split among 13 Islamist groups in 2001 burgeoning to 100,000 across 44 outfits in 2015. Terrorist attacks went up from an estimated

1,880 in 2001 to 14,806 in 2015, claiming 38,422 lives that year alone — a 397% increase on 2001.

Boosted by the US invasion of Iraq, al-Qaeda spawned affiliates across Asia, Africa and the Middle East, a decentralized structure that remained intact even after the US assassination of Osama bin Laden in 2011 dealt al-Qaeda a severe blow. One of its Iraqi offshoots morphed into what became the Islamic State (IS) group following the withdrawal of most US from Iraq under President Barack Obama in 2011.

After declaring a caliphate in 2014, IS launched a global terrorist campaign that, within a year, conducted and inspired over 140 attacks in 29 countries beyond Syria and Iraq, according to one estimate. Islamic State acolytes went on to claim nearly 30,000 lives across the Middle East, Europe, the United States, Asia and Africa, controlling vast amounts of territory in Iraq and Syria, before suffering defeat by internationally-backed local forces in 2019.

In Afghanistan, despite the war's estimated trillion-dollar price tag, on August 15 the Taliban have taken control of the capital Kabul amid a chaotic US withdrawal, raising fears of al-Qaeda's comeback. Last year, the Global Terrorism Index concluded that deaths from terrorism were still double the number recorded in 2001, with Afghanistan claiming a disproportionately large share of over 40% in 2019.

Why Do 9/11 and the War on Terror Matter?

While the failures and successes of the war on terror will remain subject to heated debate for years to come, what remains uncontested is the fact that the 9/11 attacks and the ensuing war on terror have forged the world we live in today.

First, they have caused tremendous loss of blood and treasure. Brown University's Costs of War project places an \$8-trillion price tag on the US war on terror. It estimates that about 900,000 people "were killed as a direct result of war, whether by bombs, bullets or fire," a number that does not include indirect deaths "caused by way

of disease, displacement and loss of access to food or clean drinking water."

Second, numerous countries, including liberal democracies such as the US and the UK, have eroded their own civil liberties and democratic institutions with the avowed goal of improving security. Boarding airplanes or entering public buildings now invariably involves elaborate security checks. Mass surveillance has become par for the course. The US continues to keep alleged terror suspects in indefinite detention without trial in Guantanamo Bay.

Third, many analysts argue that the attacks and the response have coarsened the US. After World War II, Americans drew a line in the sand against torture. They put Germans and Japanese on trial for war crimes that included waterboarding. In the post-9/11 world, torture became part of the American toolkit. Airstrikes and drone strikes have caused high collateral casualties, killing a disputed number of innocents and losing the battle for the hearts and minds of local populations.

These strikes raise significant issues of legality and the changing nature of warfare. There is a question as to the standing of "counterterrorism" operations in international and national law. However, such issues have garnered relatively little public attention.

Fourth, the 9/11 attacks and the ensuing war on terror have coincided with the spectacular rise of China. On December 11, 2001, the Middle Kingdom joined the World Trade Organization, which enabled the Chinese economy to grow at a speed and scale unprecedented in history. Analysts believe that distraction with the war on terror hindered the US response to the revolution occurring in global international relations and power dynamics.

Under Barack Obama, the US initiated an explicit pivot to Asia policy that sought to shift focus from the war on terror and manage the rise of China. Under Donald Trump, Washington unleashed a trade war on Beijing and concluded a peace deal with the Taliban. Joe Biden has believed that, since the early days of the war on

terror, US priorities have been too skewed toward terrorism and that Afghanistan is a secondary strategic issue, leading to a decision to withdraw troops to mark the 20th anniversary of 9/11.

Biden has argued that the US has degraded al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and eliminated bin Laden. Despite worrying echoes of George W. Bush declaring the “mission accomplished” in Iraq in 2003, from now on, Biden wants the US to remain “narrowly focused on counterterrorism — not counterinsurgency or nation building.”

While the terrorist threat still consumes US resources, Washington is now shifting its strategic attention and resources to China, Russia and Iran. The Biden administration has deemed these three authoritarian powers to be the biggest challenge for the postwar liberal and democratic order. The 20-year war on terror seems to be over — at least for now.

***Atul Singh** is the founder, CEO and editor-in-chief, and **Anna Pivovarchuk** is the co-founder and deputy managing editor of Fair Observer.

Remembering What to Remember in America

Larry Beck
September 2, 2021

Together, as a nation, Americans have to begin to walk away from violence and its always tragic end, whether in Afghanistan, Iraq or Chicago.

As America approaches the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 disaster, there are still terrorists hanging out in many of the world’s shadowy recesses, some of whom are probably hoping for another opportunity to bring down another shrine to capitalism somewhere in the American homeland. Even with this

continuing threat still looming over the nation and after years of a “war on terror” fought in far-off lands, it now seems that the greatest terrorist threat to the US comes from its homegrown “patriots,” who no longer have to hang out in America’s shadowy recesses.

Now that the American political and military exit from Afghanistan has stumbled to completion, a key component of America’s egregious and deadly response to 9/11 is finally ended after 20 years of failed policy. But failed policies should have consequences, and this one surely did, both here and abroad. The loss of life in Kabul during the withdrawal is just the latest reminder of yet another “gallant” American adventure gone bad in some foreign land. For 20 years, throughout the Muslim world, we made enemies we didn’t have to make, and we created a whole new cadre of wounded warriors in our midst ready to vanquish the incoming hordes at all cost to save the homeland from itself.

Imposing Its Will by Force

To make matters worse, there is a shocking ignorance about even relatively recent history and its relevance to the present and the future. Few Americans seem to fathom that in response to the killing of nearly 3,000 Americans on September 11, 2001, the national government set out to extract a bloody bounty to avenge each of those lost lives. While the US mourned its losses, there was hardly a thought or a moment of introspection before the nation’s leaders charted their deadly and destructive course around the world.

In every far-off land where the US government seeks to impose its will by force, no matter the reason for doing so in the first place, the people in those invaded lands pay a terrible price. And it always ends the same way. It is important to know that America has not won a war since 1945 and has not fought a war on its own soil since the Civil War. Yet in Afghanistan alone, it is estimated that hundreds of thousands of Afghans have been killed, maimed and wounded, with millions more displaced, by an

invasion that those men, women and children neither sought nor provoked.

As in Vietnam, US government operatives found elements of the local populace in Afghanistan that they assured themselves were welcoming. Then the killing started. And as always, the people we paid in those lands loved us, and the people we killed maimed and devastated hated us. And here is the lesson to be learned: There are always more of the latter than the former. When the payments stop coming, love is quickly lost, but the hatred of the devastated never dies.

Repeating the Vietnam Playbook

If there is anything to be gained from the crushing defeat and exit from Afghanistan, it is that after 20 years of repeating the same essential Vietnam playbook, while dealing death and destruction at every turn, many in America may finally understand how Vietnam ended as it did. When one nation invades another, it never ends well. When the invading nation has some messianic notion that it alone can succeed in supplanting existing cultural, social and political norms, and does so at the point of a gun, the invaded nation will eventually rebel, unite and drive out the invaders.

So, as another 9/11 anniversary looms, Americans must again try to comprehend that our national loss on September 11, 2001, was not sufficient cause to scream at the world like some out-of-control toddler. It was a horrible day because so many innocent people lost their lives and so many more were left injured and broken. But when the US government set out to exact revenge, the worst that we could be was unleashed on others, many of whom were just as innocent as those who lost their lives in America on 9/11.

In doing so, the US not only failed to wipe out terrorism, but it failed to create even a semblance of a new era of American heroism driven by an army of new American heroes. Rather it succeeded in creating an international force devoid of morality that it then had to sell at home

as some group of avenging angels. Selling that narrative became even harder when our own soldiers, as always, started to come home in body bags.

The US Failed

There is a tragic symmetry to all of this. President Joe Biden seems to be a truly decent man, and when faced with a difficult choice that paralyzed his predecessors, he made the right choice and stuck to it. But as he did so, he was unable to seize that critical moment to tell the nation that we had failed, as before.

Once again, it seemed impossible to say that we as a nation must be better and do better. When the end in Afghanistan became most tragic at a cost of American lives, Biden echoed George W. Bush after 9/11 in leading the nation to believe in a new sacred mission to root out and kill the cockroaches who did us harm. This is the worst of who we are, and it never leads to anything good. Biden could have and should have done better at that moment. Instead, he felt compelled to affirm that if you kill us, we will kill you, and it will always be disproportionately tilted toward the others, anyone in the way be damned.

It can only be hoped that no more young men and women, ours or theirs, will be sacrificed on the long-blackened stones of the alters constructed by their elders. There remain many people in the world who do not revere America the way so many here seem to think they should, and some of those will threaten the nation. Yet, after 20 years of fighting terrorism on the soil of others, the threat from afar seems minimally diminished.

Rather, a whole new generation of wounded warriors walks among us. Some are surely heroes and some are surely villains, but way too many of them are integrated into the squads of self-styled patriots in every community, mostly out in the open, dangerously armed and supported by a significant cohort of those who will be most vocal about the ravages of 9/11. I have never quite understood why you get a patriotism merit badge for killing people in far-off lands or for

simply wearing a uniform that to many in the world is synonymous with death, not dignity.

The Heroes

But this isn't about merit or merit badges. Together, as a nation, Americans have to begin to walk away from violence and its always tragic end, whether in Afghanistan, Iraq or Chicago. One image stands out to me from the chaos of the Afghanistan exit. It is the photo of two US soldiers in full battle gear lifting a baby over a razor-wired wall to a place of safety. Those soldiers are my heroes. I hope they come home and remember that moment above all else and find their voice to urge others to lift other babies over barriers to safety wherever they may be.

I give my thanks to Joe Biden for having the courage to end this futile war in Afghanistan. I hope he finds those two soldiers and tells them and the nation that they were the most heroic of all.

***Larry Beck** is a lifelong leftist and activist. He has practiced criminal law as both a prosecutor and defender.

Is Operation Enduring Freedom Doomed to Endure Forever?

S. Suresh
September 8, 2021

Can the US adopt a policy that would not aggravate the situation and, over time, deescalate it, without creating yet another Saddam Hussein or Osama bin Laden?

Those were heady days in the US stock market. I would wake up by 5 am and watch CNBC before the stock market opened for trading at 6:30 am Pacific time. It was no different on the morning of September 11,

2001. Little did I know that catastrophic things were about to happen that would change the world.

At 8:45 am Eastern time, an American Airlines flight had crashed into the north tower of the World Trade Center in New York City. Within minutes, CNBC stopped discussing stocks and started covering the incident, which, at that moment, no one knew if it was an anomalous accident or an attack of some kind.

Three minutes after 9 am Eastern, as I watched incredulously at the events unfolding, I saw a United Airlines passenger aircraft fly right into the south tower of the twin towers. In under an hour, the south tower collapsed, resulting in a massive cloud of dust and smoke. By now, there was no doubt that America was under attack.

“We will remember the moment the news came, where we were and what we were doing,” said President George W. Bush in an address to Congress on September 20. Images from that Tuesday morning are still etched in my memory, happening, as it were, just nine days after my second child was born.

In all, 2,996 people of 78 nationalities lost their lives in four coordinated attacks conducted by al-Qaeda using hijacked commercial, civilian airliners as their weapons, making 9/11 the second-biggest attack on American soil — second only to the genocidal assault on Native Americans committed by the nation's immigrant settlers.

Operation Enduring Freedom: America's War on Terror

Addressing the nation the following day, Bush called the attacks “more than acts of terror. They were acts of war.” He promised that “the United States of America will use all our resources to conquer this enemy.” The president went on to assure Americans that this “battle will take time and resolve, but make no mistake about it, we will win.”

Twenty years later, the US has left Afghanistan and Iraq in a chaotic mess. The question remains: Did the United States win the

war on terror the Bush administration launched in 2001? This was a war that has cost more than \$6.4 trillion and over 801,000 lives, according to Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs at Brown University.

In October 2001, the US-led coalition invaded Afghanistan and overthrew the Taliban government that had harbored al-Qaeda. Soon after, al-Qaeda militants had been driven into hiding. Osama bin Laden, the mastermind behind the 9/11 attack and leader of al-Qaeda, was killed 10 years later in a raid conducted by US forces in Abbottabad, Pakistan.

In a shrewd move, Bush had left himself room to take down Iraq and its president, Saddam Hussein, using an overarching definition for the war on terror. In his address to Congress on September 20, Bush also stated: “Our war on terror begins with Al-Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated.”

True to his words, in 2003, the United States and its allies invaded Iraq under the premise that it possessed weapons of mass destruction. Bush settled his score with Hussein, ensuring he was captured, shamed and subsequently executed in 2006.

Despite reducing al-Qaeda to nothing and killing bin Laden, despite wrecking Iraq and having its leader executed, it is impossible to say that the US has won the war on terror. All that Washington has managed to do is to trade the Islamic State (IS) group that swept through Syria and Iraq in 2014 for al-Qaeda, giving a new identity to an old enemy. Following the US and NATO pullout from Afghanistan last month, the Taliban, whom America drove out of power in 2001, are back in the saddle. In fact, the Taliban’s recapture of Afghanistan has been so swift, so precise and so comprehensive that the international community is in a shock, questioning the timing and prudence of the withdrawal of troops.

Setting an expectation for how long the war or terror was likely to last, the secretary of defense

under the Bush administration, Donald Rumsfeld, remarked in September 2001 that “it is not going to be over in five minutes or five months, it’ll take years.” Rumsfeld, who christened the campaign Operation Enduring Freedom, was prescient, as the war enters its third decade in a never-ending fight against terrorism.

The Winners and Losers

Ironically, Operation Enduring Freedom has only resulted in an enduring loss of American freedom, one step at a time. I still remember that I had walked up to the jet bridge and received my wife as she deplaned from a flight in 1991. Another time, when she was traveling to Boston from San Francisco, I was allowed to enter the aircraft and help her get settled with her luggage, along with our 1-year-old. It is inconceivable to be allowed to do such a thing today, and I would not be surprised if readers question the veracity of my personal experience. In many ways, al-Qaeda has succeeded in stripping Americans of the sense of freedom they have always enjoyed.

More than Americans, the biggest losers in this tragic war are Iraqis and Afghans, particularly the women. Afghan women, who had a brief respite from persecution under the Taliban’s strict Islamic laws and human rights abuses, are back to square one and justifiably terrified of their future under the new regime. The heart-wrenching scenes from Kabul airport of people trying to flee the country tell us about how Afghans view the quality of life under the Taliban and the uncertainty that the future holds.

To its east, the delicate balance of peace — if one could characterize the situation between India and Pakistan as peaceful — is likely to be put to the test as violence from Afghanistan spreads. To its north in Tajikistan, there isn’t much love lost between Tajiks and the Taliban. Tajikistan’s president, Emomali Rahmon, has refused to recognize the Taliban government, and Tajiks have promised to join anti-Taliban militia groups, paving the way for continued unrest and violence in Central Asia.

If History Could be Rewritten

In 2001, referring to Islamist terrorists, Bush asked the rhetorical question, “Why do they hate us?” He tried to answer it in a speech to Congress: “They hate what they see right here in this chamber: a democratically elected government. Their leaders are self-appointed. They hate our freedoms: our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other.”

Islamic fundamentalists couldn't give two hoots about a form of government or a people's way of life thousands of miles away. The real answer to Bush's question lies deeply buried in US foreign policy. America's steadfast support of Israel and its refusal to recognize the state of Palestine is the number one reason for it to become the target of groups like al-Qaeda and IS.

America's ill-conceived response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 during the Cold War led to the creation of al-Qaeda. It was with US funds and support that the anti-Soviet mujahideen fought America's proxy war with the Soviets. Without US interference, al-Qaeda may never have come into existence.

During the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s, the US bolstered Saddam Hussein by backing his regime against the Iranians. When Hussein became too ambitious for America's comfort and invaded Kuwait in 1990, George H.W. Bush engaged Iraq in the Persian Gulf War. The US motive at that time was primarily to protect its oil interests in Kuwait.

The US created its own nemesis in Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden and spent \$6 trillion to kill them. In the process, US leaders have reduced Iraq and Afghanistan to shambles and created a new monster in the Islamic State.

Sadly, history can never be rewritten. The US has proved time and again that its involvement in the Middle East and Muslim world is aimed at advancing its own political interests. The only question that remains is: Can the US adopt a policy that would not aggravate the situation and, over time, deescalate it, without creating yet another Hussein or bin Laden? Without a

radically different approach, Operation Enduring Freedom is doomed to endure forever, costing trillions of dollars each decade.

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The War on Terror Was Never Turkey's Fight

Nathaniel Handy
September 9, 2021

For 20 years, Turkey has had an ambiguous relationship with the US war on terror.

Do you know where you were on August 14, 2001? Perhaps not, since it isn't a defining day in world history in quite the same way as September 11, 2001, or 9/11, as it's become known. Yet in the Turkish political landscape, August 14, 2001, can now be seen as something of a watershed moment.

It was on this day that the Justice and Development Party (AKP) was founded. One of its founding members was a man named Recep Tayyip Erdogan. It was the latest in a long list of parties catering to a religiously devout and socially conservative constituency in Turkey. All the previous ones had been banned.

What makes August 14, 2001, so significant is the simple fact that the AKP was never banned. Despite the party's daring to tread on secularist principles that few others had dared, this time, the country, with strong European Union support, had no appetite for military-backed bans.

Turkey Says No

Just as September 11 didn't really come out of a clear blue sky for anyone observing the tide of Islamist militancy, so too the success of the AKP

in Turkey did not come unannounced. It was a long time in the making, but its assumption of power, so soon after 9/11, has been defining for the country.

By 2003, when George W. Bush's war on terror was swinging into action in Iraq, the AKP took control of Turkey's government. Despite repeated attempts to shutter the party and even a failed 2016 coup, the AKP remains in power. As perhaps the most successful Islamist party in the Middle East, its relationship to both the events of 9/11 and the ensuing war on terror has always been a strained one. The Turkey of the 20th century would have been an unquestioning supporter of US policy. The new Turkey was not.

I was in Turkey on 9/11 and I saw the immediate reaction of ordinary people to the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. In the hours after the towers fell, there were wild, yet in retrospect on-the-mark rumors that the US was about to bomb Afghanistan. The mood among ordinary Turks was not one of support.

Visceral anger and anti-American sentiment were clearly palpable. While not outright cheering al-Qaeda, it was obvious that most people wouldn't take the US side in a fight. This mood was reflected when Washington eventually went to war with Iraq and hoped to use the airbase at Incirlik in southeastern Turkey.

The parliamentary vote that vetoed the use of the base for flights into Iraq was a pivotal one. It was the first strong sign of demonstrable national action in reflection of a national mood. In the post-Cold War world, Turkey's Islamist government was ready to plow its own furrow.

Who Defines Terrorism?

The years that have followed have seen an ambiguous and often highly contorted relationship with the war on terror. Sometimes, Turkey has used the anti-terrorism concept to its own ends, as have many other US allies. At other times, it has turned a blind eye to activity that surely fell under the banner of terrorism.

The Arab Spring of 2010 offered Islamists across the Middle East their big moment. Secular autocrats, long propped up by the West, tottered. Turkey's Islamist government was one of the most vocal and active in attempting to ride this wave that they hoped would bring Islamist governments to a swathe of countries.

Initially, the signs were good. The Muslim Brotherhood won the first free and fair elections in Egypt. Meanwhile, in neighboring Syria, the long-suppressed Islamist movement threatened to overwhelm the dictatorship of Bashar al-Assad. For a time, Turkey became a beacon of hope and a model for how the rest of the Middle East might evolve.

Turkish flags were being waved by demonstrators in Syria, and President Erdogan became the most popular leader in the region, loved by people far beyond his own nation. Then the Egyptian coup destroyed the Brotherhood, and Russia and Iran stepped in to save Assad's regime in Syria. The mood soured for Turkey.

In an attempt to rescue something in the Syrian conflict and in response to the collapse of domestic peace talks between the government and the Kurdistan Workers' Party, Turkey's border became a very porous route for jihadists entering into Syria. In time, these jihadists named themselves the Islamic State and declared a caliphate. This audacious move severely upped the stakes on al-Qaeda's attempts of 2001, with an even more brutal brand of terrorism. Turkey's ambiguous attitude to these developments was hardly a war on terror.

Yet by this stage, the concept behind the war on terror had become so nebulous and the AKP's relations to the US so strained by Washington's support for the Kurds in Syria, that it was a case of realpolitik all the way. To any accusation of soft-handedness toward terrorists, Turkey pointed to US attitudes vis-à-vis Kurdish militants.

President Erdogan has, over time, begun to carve a space for himself as an anti-Western champion, a leader of some kind of latter-day non-aligned movement, a spokesman for Muslim rights worldwide. This political and cultural

position has made Turkey's place in a liberal, democratic world order highly questionable.

What seems clear in retrospect is that both 9/11 and the subsequent war on terror were never Turkey's fights. Due to the longstanding Turkish alliance with the US and NATO, these have been constantly recurring themes in Turkish politics. But the events that have been so central to US policymaking for the past two decades have generally been used to advance Ankara's own strategic goals in light of the assumption of power and entrenched hegemony of the Islamist movement in Turkey's contemporary politics.

***Nathaniel Handy** is a writer and academic with over 10 years of experience in international print and broadcast media.

Will the US Wake Up From Its Post-9/11 Nightmare?

Medea Benjamin & Nicolas J.S. Davies
September 10, 2021

After 20 years of war and militarism, the US must choose the path of peace.

Looking back on it now, the 1990s were an age of innocence for America. The Cold War was over and our leaders promised us a "peace dividend." There was no TSA — the Transportation Security Administration — to make us take off our shoes at airports (how many bombs have they found in those billions of shoes?). The government could not tap a US phone or read private emails without a warrant from a judge. And the national debt was only \$5 trillion, compared with over \$28 trillion today.

We have been told that the criminal attacks of September 11, 2001, "changed everything." But what really changed everything was the US government's disastrous response to them. That

response was not preordained or inevitable, but the result of decisions and choices made by politicians, bureaucrats and generals who fueled and exploited our fears, unleashed wars of reprehensible vengeance and built a secretive security state, all thinly disguised behind Orwellian myths of American greatness.

Most Americans believe in democracy and many regard the United States as a democratic country. But the US response to 9/11 laid bare the extent to which American leaders are willing to manipulate the public into accepting illegal wars, torture, the Guantanamo gulag and sweeping civil rights abuses — activities that undermine the very meaning of democracy.

Former Nuremberg prosecutor Ben Ferencz said in a speech in 2011 that "a democracy can only work if its people are being told the truth." But America's leaders exploited the public's fears in the wake of 9/11 to justify wars that have killed and maimed millions of people who had nothing to do with those crimes. Ferencz compared this to the actions of the German leaders he prosecuted at Nuremberg, who also justified their invasions of other countries as "preemptive first strikes."

"You cannot run a country as Hitler did, feeding them a pack of lies to frighten them that they're being threatened, so it's justified to kill people you don't even know," Ferencz continued. "It's not logical, it's not decent, it's not moral, and it's not helpful. When an unmanned bomber from a secret American airfield fires rockets into a little Pakistani or Afghan village and thereby kills or maims unknown numbers of innocent people, what is the effect of that? Every victim will hate America forever and will be willing to die killing as many Americans as possible. Where there is no court of justice, wild vengeance is the alternative."

"Insurgent Math"

Even the commander of US forces in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, talked about "insurgent math," conjecturing that, for every innocent person killed, the US created 10

new enemies. Thus, the so-called global war on terror fueled a global explosion of terrorism and armed resistance that will not end unless and until the United States ends the state terrorism that provokes and fuels it.

By opportunistically exploiting 9/11 to attack countries that had nothing to do with it, like Iraq, Somalia, Libya, Syria and Yemen, the US vastly expanded the destructive strategy it used in the 1980s to destabilize Afghanistan, which spawned the Taliban and al-Qaeda in the first place. In Libya and Syria, only 10 years after 9/11, US leaders betrayed every American who lost a loved one on September 11 by recruiting and arming al-Qaeda-led militants to overthrow two of the most secular governments in the Middle East, plunging both countries into years of intractable violence and fueling radicalization throughout the region.

The US response to 9/11 was corrupted by a toxic soup of revenge, imperialist ambitions, war profiteering, systematic brainwashing and sheer stupidity. Lincoln Chafee, the only Republican senator who voted against the war on Iraq, later wrote, "Helping a rogue president start an unnecessary war should be a career-ending lapse of judgment."

But it wasn't. Very few of the 263 Republicans or the 110 Democrats who voted in 2002 for the US to invade Iraq paid any political price for their complicity in international aggression, which the judges at Nuremberg explicitly called "the supreme international crime." One of them now sits at the apex of power in the White House.

Failure in Afghanistan

Donald Trump and Joe Biden's withdrawal and implicit acceptance of the US defeat in Afghanistan could serve as an important step toward ending the violence and chaos their predecessors unleashed after the 9/11 attacks. But the current debate over next year's military budget makes it clear that our deluded leaders are still dodging the obvious lessons of 20 years of war.

Barbara Lee, the only member of Congress with the wisdom and courage to vote against the war resolution in 2001, has introduced a bill to cut US military spending by almost half: \$350 billion per year. With the miserable failure in Afghanistan, a war that will end up costing every US taxpayer \$20,000, one would think that Representative Lee's proposal would be eliciting tremendous support. But the White House, the Pentagon and the Armed Services Committees in the House and Senate are instead falling over each other to shovel even more money into the bottomless pit of the military budget.

Politicians' votes on questions of war, peace and military spending are the most reliable test of their commitment to progressive values and the well-being of their constituents. You cannot call yourself a progressive or a champion of working people if you vote to appropriate more money for weapons and war than for health care, education, green jobs and fighting poverty.

These 20 years of war have revealed to Americans and the world that modern weapons and formidable military forces can only accomplish two things: kill and maim people and destroy homes, infrastructure and entire cities. American promises to rebuild bombed-out cities and "remake" countries it has destroyed have proved worthless, as President Biden has acknowledged.

Both Iraq and Afghanistan are turning primarily to China for the help they need to start rebuilding and developing economically from the ruin and devastation left by the US and its allies. America destroys, China builds. The contrast could not be more stark or self-evident. No amount of Western propaganda can hide what the whole world can see.

But the different paths chosen by American and Chinese leaders are not predestined. Despite the intellectual and moral bankruptcy of the US corporate media, the American public has always been wiser and more committed to cooperative diplomacy than their country's political and executive class. It has been well-documented that many of the endless crises in US foreign policy

could have been avoided if America's leaders had just listened to the people.

Weapons and More Weapons

The perennial handicap that has dogged US diplomacy since World War II is precisely our investment in weapons and military forces, including nuclear weapons that threaten our very existence. It is trite but true to say that, "when the only tool you have is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail."

Other countries don't have the option of deploying overwhelming military force to confront international problems, so they have had to be smarter and more nimble in their diplomacy and more prudent and selective in their more limited uses of military force.

The rote declarations of US leaders that "all options are on the table" are a euphemism for precisely the "threat or use of force" that the UN Charter explicitly prohibits, and they stymie the US development of expertise in nonviolent forms of conflict resolution. The bumbling and bombast of America's leaders in international arenas stand in sharp contrast to the skillful diplomacy and clear language we often hear from top Russian, Chinese and Iranian diplomats, even when they are speaking in English, their second or third language.

By contrast, US leaders rely on threats, coups, sanctions and war to project power around the world. They promise Americans that these coercive methods will maintain US "leadership" or dominance indefinitely into the future, as if that is America's rightful place in the world: sitting atop the globe like a cowboy on a bucking bronco.

A "new American century" and "Pax Americana" are Orwellian versions of Adolf Hitler's "thousand-year Reich" but are no more realistic. No empire has lasted forever, and there is historical evidence that even the most successful empires have a lifespan of no more than 250 years, by which time their rulers have enjoyed so much wealth and power that

decadence and decline inevitably set in. This describes the United States today.

America's economic dominance is waning. Its once productive economy has been gutted and financialized, and most countries in the world now do more trade with China and/or the European Union than with the United States. Where America's military once kicked open doors for American capital to "follow the flag" and open up new markets, today's US war machine is just a bull in the global china shop, wielding purely destructive power.

Time to Get Serious

But we are not condemned to passively follow the suicidal path of militarism and hostility. Biden's withdrawal from Afghanistan could be a down payment on a transition to a more peaceful post-imperial economy — if the American public starts to actively demand peace, diplomacy and disarmament and find ways to make our voices heard.

First, we must get serious about demanding cuts in the Pentagon budget. None of our other problems will be solved as long as we keep allowing our leaders to flush the majority of federal discretionary spending down the same military toilet as the \$2.26 trillion they wasted on the war in Afghanistan. We must oppose politicians who refuse to cut the Pentagon budget, regardless of which party they belong to and where they stand on other issues.

Second, we must not let ourselves or our family members be recruited into the US war machine. Instead, we must challenge our leaders' absurd claims that the imperial forces deployed across the world to threaten other countries are somehow, by some convoluted logic, defending America. As a translator paraphrased Voltaire, "Whoever can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities."

Third, we must expose the ugly, destructive reality behind our country's myths of "defending" US vital interests, humanitarian intervention, the war on terror and the latest absurdity, the ill-defined "rules-based order" —

whose rules only apply to others but never to the United States.

Finally, we must oppose the corrupt power of the arms industry, including US weapons sales to the world's most repressive regimes, and an unwinnable arms race that risks a potentially world-ending conflict with China and Russia.

Our only hope for the future is to abandon the futile quest for hegemony and instead commit to peace, cooperative diplomacy, international law and disarmament. After 20 years of war and militarism that has only left the world a more dangerous place and accelerated America's decline, we must choose the path of peace.

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9/11 and the American Collective Unconscious

Peter Isackson
September 10, 2021

On the 20th anniversary of a moment of horror, the families of 9/11 victims want the full truth.

A little more than a month ago, the most newsworthy controversy surrounding the imminent and highly symbolic 20th anniversary of 9/11 concerned the message by families of the victims that Joe Biden would not be welcome at the planned commemoration. They reproached the US president for failing to make good on last year's campaign promise to declassify the documents they believe will reveal Saudi Arabia's implication in the attacks.

That was the story that grabbed headlines at the beginning of August. Hardly a week later, everything had changed. Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, fell to the Taliban and soon the 20-year war would be declared over.

Though few paid attention to the phenomenon, this also meant that the significance of a commemoration of the attacks, would be radically different. For 19 years, the commemoration served to reinforce the will and resolution of the nation to overcome the humiliation of the fallen twin towers and a damaged wing of the Pentagon.

Redefining the Meaning of the Historical Trauma

In the aftermath of the attacks on September 11, 2001, politicians quickly learned to exploit the date as a painful reminder of a tragedy that had unified an otherwise chaotically disputatious nation in shared horror and mourning. Ever since that fatal day, politicians have invoked it to reinforce the belief in American exceptionalism.

The nation is so exceptional in generously providing its people with what President George W. Bush called "our freedoms" — and which he identified as the target of the terrorists — that it was logical to suppose that evil people who didn't possess those freedoms or were prevented from emigrating to the land of the free would do everything in their power to destroy those freedoms. To the degree that Americans are deeply thankful for possessing such an exceptional status, other ill-intentioned people will take exception to that exceptionality and in their unjustified jealousy will threaten to destroy it.

On a less philosophical and far more pragmatic note, the remembrance of the 9/11 attacks has conveniently and consistently served to justify an ever-expanding military budget that no patriotic American, interested in preserving through the force of arms the nation's exceptional status, should ever oppose. It went without saying, through the three previous presidencies, that the annual commemoration provided an

obvious explanation of why the forever war in Afghanistan was lasting forever.

The fall of Kabul on August 15, followed by the panicked retreat of all remaining Americans, caught everyone by surprise. It unexpectedly brought an official end to the war whose unforgettable beginning is traced back to that bright September day in 2001. Though no one has yet had the time to put it all in perspective, the debate in the media has shifted away from glossing the issues surrounding an ongoing war on terror to assessing the blame for its ignominious end. Some may have privately begun to wonder whether the theme being commemorated on this September 11 now concerns the martyrdom of its victims or the humiliation of the most powerful nation in the history of the world. The pace of events since mid-August has meant that the media have been largely silent on this quandary.

So, What About Saudi Arabia?

With the American retreat, the controversy around Biden's unkept campaign promise concerning Saudi Arabia's implication in 9/11 provisionally took a backseat to a much more consequent quarrel, one that will have an impact on next year's midterm elections. Nearly every commentator has been eager to join the fray focusing on the assessment of the wisdom or folly of both Biden's decision to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan and his seemingly improvised management of the final chaotic phase.

The human tragedy visible in the nightly news as throngs of people at Kabul airport desperately sought to flee the country easily eclipsed the genteel but politically significant showdown between a group of American citizens demanding the truth and a government committed to protecting the reputations of friends and allies, especially ones from oil-rich nations.

The official excuse turns around the criterion that has become a magic formula: national security. But the relatives of victims are justified in wondering which nation's security is being

prioritized. They have a sneaking suspicion that some people in Washington have confused their own nation's security with Saudi Arabia's. Just as John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt not long ago revealed that plenty of people within the Beltway continue to confuse US foreign policy with Israel's, the families may be justified in suspecting that Saudi Arabia's interest in hiding the truth trumps American citizens' right to know the truth.

To appease the families of 9/11 victims and permit his unimpeded participation in the commemorations, Biden offered to release some of the classified documents. It was a clever move, since the new, less-redacted version will only become available well after the commemoration. This gesture seems to have accomplished its goal of preventing an embarrassing showdown at the commemoration ceremonies. But it certainly will not be enough to satisfy the demands of the families, who apparently remain focused on obtaining that staple of the US criminal justice system: "the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth."

Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), the crown prince of Saudi Arabia, may have shown the way concerning the assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018. Like MBS, the White House prefers finding a way to release some of the truth rather than the whole truth — just the amount that doesn't violate national security or tarnish the reputations of any key people. Those two goals have increasingly become synonymous. If the people knew what actual political personalities were doing, the nation's security might be endangered, as the people might begin to lose faith in a government that insists on retaining the essential power of deciding how the truth should be told.

Here is how the White House officially formulates the legal principle behind its commitment to unveiling a little more truth than is currently available. "Although the indiscriminate release of classified information could jeopardize the national security — including the United States Government's efforts

to protect against future acts of terrorism — information should not remain classified when the public interest in disclosure outweighs any damage to the national security that might reasonably be expected from disclosure.”

The White House has thus formulated an innovative legal principle brilliantly designed to justify concealing enough of the naked truth to avoid offending public morals by revealing its stark nakedness. Legal scholars of the future may refer to it as the “indiscriminate release” principle. Its logical content is worth exploring. It plays on the auxiliary verbs “could” and “should.” “Could” is invoked in such a way as to suggest that, though it is possible, no reasonable person would take the risk of an “indiscriminate release of classified information.” Later in the same sentence, the auxiliary verb “should” serves to speculatively establish the moral character of the principle. It tells us what “should” be the case — that is, what is morally ideal — even if inevitably the final result will be quite different. This allows the White House to display its good intentions while preparing for an outcome that will surely disappoint.

To justify its merely partial exposure of the truth, the White House offers another original moral concept when it promises the maximization of transparency. The full sentence reads: “It is therefore critical to ensure that the United States Government maximizes transparency.”

There is of course an easy way to maximize transparency if that is truly the government’s intention. It can be done simply by revealing everything and hiding nothing within the limits of its physical capability. No one doubts that the government is physically capable of removing all the redactions. But the public should know by now that the value cited as overriding all others — national security — implicitly requires hiding a determined amount of the truth. In other words, it is framed as a trade-off between maximum transparency and minimum concealment. Biden has consistently compared himself to President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Perhaps that trade-off

between transparency and concealment is what historians will call Biden’s New Deal.

But the White House’s reasoning is not yet complete. The document offers yet another guiding principle to explain why not everything will become visible. “Thus, information collected and generated in the United States Government’s investigation of the 9/11 terrorist attacks should now be disclosed,” it affirms, “except when the strongest possible reasons counsel otherwise.” Those reasons, the document tells us, will be defined by the Federal Bureau of Investigation during its “declassification reviews.” This invocation of the “strongest possible reasons” appears to empower the FBI to define or at least apply not only what is “strongest,” but also what is “possible.” That constitutes a pretty broad power.

The document states very clearly what the government sees as the ultimate criterion for declassification: “Information may remain classified only if it still requires protection in the interest of the national security and disclosure of the information reasonably could be expected to result in damage to the national security. Information shall not remain classified if there is significant doubt about the need to maintain its classified status.” The families of the victims can simply hope that there will not be too much “significant doubt.” They might be forgiven for doubting that that will be the case.

One September Morning vs. 20 Years of Subsequent Mornings

Twenty years ago, a spectacular crime occurred on the East Coast of the United States that set off two decades of crimes, blunders and judgment errors that, now compounded by COVID-19 and aggravated climate change, have brought the world to a crisis point unique in human history.

The Bush administration, in office for less than eight months at the time of the event, with no certain knowledge of who the perpetrator might have been, chose to classify the attack not as a crime, but as an act of war. When the facts eventually did become clearer after a moment of

hesitation in which the administration attempted even to implicate Iraq, the crime became unambiguously attributable, not to a nation but to a politically motivated criminal organization: Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda that back then was operating out of Afghanistan, which was ruled by the Taliban.

The administration's choice of treating the attack as an act of war not only stands as a crime in itself, but, as history has shown, as the trigger for a series of even more shameless and far more destructive — if not quite as spectacular — crimes that would roll out for the next two decades and even gain momentum over time. Had the 9/11 attacks been treated as crimes rather than acts of war, the question of national security would have had less importance in the investigation. By going to war with Afghanistan, the Bush administration made it more difficult to investigate all the possible complicities. Could this partially explain its precipitation to start a war?

Bin Laden, a Saudi, did not act alone. But he did not act in the name of a state either, which is the fundamental criterion for identifying an act of war. He acted within a state, in the territory of Afghanistan. Though his motive was political and the chosen targets were evocatively symbolic of political power, the act itself was in no way political. No more so, in any case, than the January 6 insurrection this year on Capitol Hill.

Though the facts are still being obscured and the text describing them remains redacted in the report of the 9/11 Commission, reading between the redacted lines reveals that bin Laden did have significant support from powerful personalities in Saudi Arabia, many of them with a direct connection to the government. This foreknowledge would seem to indicate complicity at some level of the state.

On this 20th anniversary of a moment of horror, the families of the victims quite logically continue to suspect that if a state was involved that might eventually justify a declaration of war by Congress (as required by the US Constitution), the name of that state should not have been

Afghanistan, but Saudi Arabia. It is equally clear that the Afghan government at the time was in no way directly complicit.

When the new version of the 9/11 Commission's report appears with its "maximum transparency," meaning a bare minimum of redaction, the objections of the victims' families will no longer be news, and the truth about the deeper complicities around 9/11 will most probably remain obscured. Other dramas, concerning the state of the COVID-19 pandemic, the increasingly obvious consequences of climate change and an upcoming midterm election will probably mean that next year's 21st commemoration will be low-keyed and possibly considered unworthy of significant mention in the news.

In 2021, the world has become a decidedly different place than it has been over the past two decades. The end of a forever war simply promises a host of new forever problems to emerge for increasingly unstable democracies to deal with.

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The War on Terror Drove Iraq Into Iran's Orbit

Mehmet Alaca
September 13, 2021

Aiming to limit US influence, Iran has been gradually reshaping Iraq's internal and security policy since 2003.

After al-Qaeda targeted the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, then-US President George W. Bush declared his (in)famous doctrine of the

global war on terror, which will continue to have a great effect on the Middle East and the world for the coming decades, if not centuries. The framework implemented an aggressive foreign policy against Iraq, Iran and North Korea, singled out as the “axis of evil” in the new world order.

After 20 years of the doctrine in action, which saw the occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq that further ignited regional instability, President Joe Biden has withdrawn US troops from Afghanistan and is determined to end the combat mission in Iraq by the end of the year. Without concluding whether two decades of aggression succeeded in defeating terrorism, it can be said that the war on terror opened a new area of influence for one of the axis of evil, namely Iran in Iraq.

Opening the Gates

Thanks to its Shia population, Iraq has been a significant target of Iranian foreign policy since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Due to both geographic and sectarian proximity, Iran, which sees Washington as an enemy and a source of instability in the region, was suspicious of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq.

Deeming Baathist Iraq as a major threat to its national security, the regime in Tehran has meddled in its neighbor’s internal politics and strategic tendencies ever since coming to power. With the US toppling of Saddam Hussein, however, Iran succeeded in courting Iraq’s Shia population by taking advantage of its shared border and cultural, religious and economic ties.

The fact that significant Shia figures opposed to the Iraqi regime took refuge in Iran in the early 1980s strengthened Tehran’s relations with these groups in the post-invasion period. During this time, the Shia population has become influential in the Iraqi state and society. For example, Hadi al-Amiri, the leader of the Badr Organization militia, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the recently deceased vice president of the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), count among some of the most prominent pro-Iranian figures in the current Iraqi political and military establishments.

The Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, a Shia resistance group headed by Ayatollah Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim hoping to topple Saddam Hussein’s regime, was established in Iran in 1982. It became a pioneer organization for various Shia militias and political groups with connections to Tehran, incorporating the Badr Organization, then known as the Badr Brigades.

While Iran benefitted from the support of Iraqi militias during the inconclusive war with Iraq in the 1980s, Tehran redirected this mobilization against the US forces following the 2003 invasion. The Iraqi militia group Kataib Hezbollah was formed in early 2007, followed by Asaib Ahl al-Haq, as part of the campaign by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force against US forces.

Iran’s presence in Iraq came to light when the Americans captured several Iranian operatives in 2006 and 2007, among them Mohsen Chizari of the IRGC. Asaib Ahl al-Haq kidnapped and killed five US soldiers in January 2007, but two months later, coalition forces captured the militia’s leader, Qais al-Khazali, alongside an operative of Hezbollah, Tehran’s proxy in Lebanon, Ali Musa Daqduq. It is well known that the Jaish al-Mahdi militias led by Muqtada al-Sadr, who still has distant dealings with Iran, received intensive Iranian support to fight against the United States.

The disbanding the Iraqi army and establishing the interim government by the US after 2003 provided Iran with new opportunities to secure many significant positions in the bureaucracy. In this process, many members of the Badr Brigades were integrated into the new army and police forces, their political connections winning many rapid promotions. Today, Badr is still one of the most active groups within the police, the army and the Ministry of Interior.

Consolidation of Iranian Power

The Baghdad government was formed along ethnic and sectarian quotas. As per the country’s

2005 constitution, the presidency was allocated to the Kurds, the prime minister's office to the Shia and the position of parliament's speaker to the Sunnis. The allocation of the executive position to Shia leaders strengthened Iran's elbow room in Iraqi politics.

The sectarian policies of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, who held office between 2006 and 2014, disquieted the Sunni society further. In addition to the fact that the Shia occupied a central position in the administrative system, the American inability to understand Sunni expectations has marginalized Sunni society. Radicalization led to the resurgence of al-Qaeda and later the formation of the even more extreme Islamic State (IS) group in the Sunni regions of Iraq.

After capturing Mosul in June 2014, IS has taken control of almost a third of Iraqi territory. All Shia groups fighting against the new threat were united under the banner of the Popular Mobilization Units — an umbrella organization controlled mainly by pro-Iran armed groups — after Iraq's top Shia cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, called for all those able to carry a weapon to take up arms.

The PMU militias were provided with American and Iranian-made weapons during their fight against IS. Pro-Iranian militias such as the Badr Organization, Kataib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al-Haq dominated the PMU. Active support by the IRGC provided to Iraqi militias and the presence of Qassem Soleimani, a Quds Force commander, at the front lines pointed to Iran's effectiveness in the field.

Integrating the PMU as a legal part of the Iraqi security mechanism in 2016 further legitimized Iranian influence in the political and military establishments. For instance, almost \$1.7 billion was allocated to the PMU, which consists of some 100,000 militants, from the \$90-billion Iraqi budget in 2021.

Defeating the Islamic State

After the declaration of victory against IS in 2017, tensions between Iran and the US, placed

on the back burner during the campaign, reignited. While US officials argued that the PMU completed their mission and should be dissolved, pro-Iranian groups reassumed their anti-American tone.

Thanks to their active role in the fight against IS, Iran-backed militias secured their position in the military bureaucracy and were able to establish themselves politically. The Fatah Alliance, under the leadership of Hadi al-Amiri and backed by pro-Iranian militias, gained victory in the 2018 election, becoming the second-largest group in the Iraqi parliament. Iran has thus become one of the decision-makers in post-IS Iraq.

Tensions increased in 2018 after President Donald Trump decided to unilaterally withdraw the United States from the nuclear deal with Iran. Pro-Iranian forces began to attack US forces on the ground in Iraq. While Iran seemed to want to punish the US via the Iraqi militias, these attacks also aimed at forcing Americans to withdraw from Iraq. The situation has come to an apogee with the killing of Soleimani and Muhandis in the US drone strike in Baghdad on January 3, 2020.

The assassinations shifted the tensions to the political arena. On January 5, under the leadership of pro-Iranian groups, a resolution was passed in Iraq's parliament to call on the government to expel foreign troops from the country. In addition to political pressures, as a result of ongoing attacks by pro-Iranian militias on American bases and soldiers in Iraq, the US abandoned many of its bases in the country. As a result of strategic dialogue negotiations with Baghdad, Washington decided to withdraw its combat forces and retain only consultant support. To a large degree, Iran managed to get what it wanted — to drive the US out and reassert its own influence in the region.

Pro-Iranian militias, already active in the Shia regions, started to show their presence in Sunni-dominated areas such as Mosul, Anbar and Saladin after the defeat of IS. Furthermore, Iran-backed groups pursue a long-term strategy to seize control of disputed areas between the

central government and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Iran-backed groups, including the Badr Organization, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Kataib Imam Ali, Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada and Saraya al-Khorasani, have been active in the disputed territories since 2014.

At the same time, these militias under the PMU umbrella reject control by Baghdad and threaten the central government. So much so that Abu Ali Askari, a spokesman for Kataib Hezbollah, was able to say that “the time is appropriate to cut his ears as the ears of a goat are cut,” referring to Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, while militias were able to flex their muscle against the government in the streets of Baghdad amid tensions leading up to the anniversary of Soleimani’s assassination.

Aiming to limit US influence, Iran has been gradually reshaping Iraq’s internal and security policy since 2003. While millions are still paying the price of the war on terror in Iraq, which resulted in the collapse of the political and economic systems followed by a campaign of terror by the Islamic State, Iran continues to consolidate its power, both in military and political spheres.

After an 18-year-long story of invasion and with the US poised to withdraw its combat forces, Iran’s hegemony over Iraq will inevitably come to fruition. The sectarian and ethnic emphasis within the framework of the government quota system not only prevents the formation of independent Iraqi identity but also keeps fragile social fault lines dynamic, an opportunity that Iran will, without doubt, continue to exploit.

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The 9/11 Boomerang Comes Back to America

Ali Demirdas
September 13, 2021

The relentless US war machine inadvertently created a ripple effect the implications of which have been felt far beyond the Middle East.

The violent attack on the US Capitol that defiled the very foundations of “the beacon of democracy” not only violently jolted the American psyche but astonished the world. While many scratched their heads and asked why this was happening, many others pointed to Donald Trump as being culpable for, as some put it, “the coup attempt.” However, this determination is far too myopic and fails to take into account the much bigger picture, one that has been two decades in the making.

The grave mistakes that the post-9/11 Washington administrations made in Afghanistan and Iraq have contributed to the rupture of American society, ultimately culminating in the cataclysmic events of January 6. It permanently stained America’s global image as the promoter and defender of democracy. One wonders if the masterminds of the 9/11 attacks may have actually succeeded in their mission to undermine America’s democratic ethos.

War on Terror

In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, the Bush administration acquired from Congress the Authorization of Use of Military Force against a wide array of people or groups that “planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks or harbored such organizations or persons.” Within weeks, the US assembled a global coalition of more than 50 nation-states, initiating Operation Enduring Freedom, which quickly ended the Taliban’s five-year reign.

Then came Colin Powell's infamous speech at the United Nations, in which the Bush administration desperately tried to justify an invasion of Iraq. Having been unable to garner support, Washington initiated its March 2003 campaign unilaterally.

While the initially stated objectives of both invasions were reached — the toppling of the Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq — the vaguely defined global war on terror required the US to maintain a gargantuan military footprint in the wider Middle East region. In 2011, President Barack Obama raised the total number of military personnel in Afghanistan and Iraq to a massive 100,000.

The relentless US military war machine across the region inadvertently created a ripple effect the implications of which have been felt far and away, in Europe and across the Atlantic: refugees.

In Afghanistan, an estimated 50,000 civilians were killed as a direct result of the 20-year war, 20,000 of them in US airstrikes. Furthermore, CIA-funded Afghan paramilitary forces are known to have committed egregious abuses against the local population in the name of the fight against the Taliban. The extreme corruption of the US-backed governments of Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani further alienated and oppressed the Afghan people.

In Iraq, the US deposing of Saddam Hussein and the subsequent de-Baathification — the removal and exclusion of any military or civilian associated with his regime — initiated fierce sectarian violence where the Shia Arabs, once oppressed by Hussein, began their retribution. Hussein's generals, in turn, mounted a Sunni insurgency, which ultimately morphed into the Islamic State (IS, or Daesh).

In 2015, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who helped George W. Bush invade Iraq, acknowledged that "Without the Iraq War, there would be no ISIS." Daesh made its biggest gains by steamrolling into Syria in 2014. At its peak, the terrorist group controlled almost a third of

Syria and much of central Iraq. Daesh's push across Iraq and Syria created more refugees.

The US-led coalition then embarked on an extremely destructive military operation in late 2016 to retake Mosul and Raqqa from Daesh. It is estimated that the indiscriminate bombing of those two cities caused the death of more than 11,000 civilians. Furthermore, the US-backed proxies, particularly the Democratic Union Party, were accused by Amnesty International of committing ethnic cleansing in Syria.

Anti-Immigrant Tide

All things considered, the US-led war on terror in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria has directly or indirectly created refugees and migrants numbering in the millions, whose last stop is generally the European Union. The world watched in shock as migrants tried to cross the Mediterranean in overflowing boats; those who were successful found themselves scaling barbed-wire fences in countries whose borders otherwise allow unhindered travel.

The migrant crisis became particularly severe in 2015. According to the UN, an estimated 800,000 migrants and refugees, fleeing conflict and persecution in Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq arrived on European shores that year.

The growing refugee crisis began to shape the European political scene, giving rise to right-wing and populist politicians, threatening the EU's liberal and democratic foundations. In Poland, the anti-migrant, xenophobic, Euroskeptic Law and Justice party won the 2015 parliamentary elections by a landslide.

Hungary witnessed the consolidation of power by right-wing Prime Minister Victor Orban around the rhetoric of a migrant invasion. Citing the need to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, parliament granted extraordinary powers to Orban, turning him into a de-facto autocrat who, as many experts believe, has suffocated Hungarian democracy.

Most notably, the proponents of Brexit exploited the migrant crisis to scare voters into supporting the bid to leave the European Union.

Nigel Farage, the leader of the far-right UK Independence Party and an ardent advocate of Brexit, produced a poster showing thousands of refugees crossing the Croatia-Slovenia border in 2015. The words “BREAKING POINT” were emblazoned across the picture, above a line that read: “We must break free of the EU and take back control of our borders.”

Around 75% of the pro-Brexit voters cited immigration as the most important issue the UK faced. In October 2015, the anti-immigration Swiss People’s Party won Switzerland’s parliamentary elections by a landslide, swinging the country to the right. Many other conservative parties across Europe considerably increased their votes as well.

It appeared that the 2015 rapidly booming refugee influx constituted a major turning point for much of European politics in terms of the right-wing upsurge. The anti-immigrant tide didn’t spare the United States either. In his 2016 presidential campaign, Donald Trump often pointed to the migrant crisis in Europe to make a case for tough immigration policies along the US-Mexico border and for the need to build a wall.

On April 28, 2016, he said: “Look at what’s happening all over Europe. It’s a mess and we don’t need it. ... When you look at that migration, you see so many young, strong men. Does anyone notice that? Am I the only one? Young, strong men. And you’re almost like, ‘Why aren’t they fighting?’ You don’t see that many women and children.” According to Pew Research Center, around 65% of Trump supporters viewed immigration as a “very big problem” for the United States.

America threw a boomerang at the greater Middle East at the turn of the century. It struck Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Libya, among others, causing death and devastation. A decade later, it moved on to Europe, leading to the gradual revival of the “menace” the Europeans have tried to bury for so long, that of right-wing ultranationalism.

Ultimately, the returning boomerang arrived on US shores, propelling Trump to the White House. As a result, the American public has never been so divided, not since the Civil War. On January 6, the boomerang finally returned to Congress, revealing the ever-growing weakness of American democracy.

The abrupt and disastrous withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan in August is expected to produce even more refugees, creating a crisis that will hit Europe even harder than the one in 2015. This alone indicates that the policymakers in Washington have failed to learn lessons from the last two decades.

As China is fast ascending toward global hegemony, the West in general and the US in particular are facing tremendous challenges. The questions yet to be answered are whether past mistakes constitute a lesson for the future. What has America learned from the tragedy of 9/11?

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How America Won the War in Afghanistan

Brandon Scott
September 15, 2021

Those that argue that the Afghan War was lost fail to understand the very concept of conflict.

The Second World War ruined our concept of conflict. It led us to believe that conflicts are wars, and wars consist of two sides fighting, with a singular monolithic outcome that one side wins. Everyone comes home. There is a parade. A sailor kisses a woman. Boom. War won.

This is a myth of epic proportions. Conflict is not war, though wars are a part of conflict. Although wars are typically made up of many battles, a battle is not a war, and a war is not a conflict. Conflicts go on for decades and centuries and evolve, devolve, merges, morph, fizzle out, flares up, expand and shrink geographically, go from hot to warm to cold, and develop into hybrid forms.

The most famous US war that is said to be lost, Vietnam, was actually won. It just took 40 years. Vietnam is a free-market country for all intents and purposes, a US ally with an extensive population exchange. All the wars that we claimed as victories were never won in the sense of this black-and-white model that we derive from World War II. Not even World War II was won in the sense of its own model.

It was not a clean cut. There were small pockets of resistance afterward. There are still neo-Nazis in Germany, where the US still has troops. Germany still battles the US on various fronts — political, economic and social. Yet no one says that the United States lost the war against Germany.

Conflict has a four-dimensional, never-ending spectrum that is partnered in a dance with peace. It consists of two bipolar points that are constantly in a fluid twirl together like one of those geospatial screen savers on your Compaq computer in 1998.

The Korean War was never won. The Cold War was never won. The First Gulf War was only won in the sense that Iraqi troops were pushed out of Kuwait. But the First Gulf War was only a battle within a larger conflict. The Second Gulf War — the Iraq War — consists of about four or more wars that all fall under the same umbrella of conflict.

When you speak to Iraqis, they make a distinction between the invasion in 2003, the sectarian war and the fight against the Islamic State (IS). The fact that Americans insist on viewing the war in Iraq as a singular monolithic war is sadly due to their lack of attention, detail

and the narrow-mindedness of the World War II syndrome.

Those that argue that the Afghan War was lost fail to understand the concept of conflict. The war in Afghanistan was never lost because it never began. It has continued in some fashion for centuries. The actors rotated through, changing names and ambitions. The Taliban may currently lay claim to political power and maintain some level of a monopoly of violence, but that is not universal. They maintain this status because we let them.

Make no mistake about it: There was never a moment in time that the US could not have removed the Taliban from the world map. However, moral obligations hindered this, given the massive number of civilian casualties it would have cost. So no, the Taliban and their cohorts at no point “beat” the US military and its NATO allies.

It may be argued that we failed to train the Afghan army. The same could be said of the Iraqi army in 2014 faced with IS, but does not hold true today. Moreover, we did not fail at training the Afghan people. What the Taliban are confronted with, assuming they maintain power, is the same challenge every government or occupier in Afghanistan has always faced. The difference is that this isn't the same Afghanistan of two decades ago.

For 20 years, we have vaccinated the Afghan population with concepts of freedom, education, work, opportunities, the English language and liberal thought. All the while, the Taliban showed their true colors by killing innocent people as a matter of policy and without remorse. The Afghans know the Taliban. They do not like them. They may not all be the greatest fans of having US or NATO troops in their country, but more than 80% definitively prefer a nation not run by the Taliban.

In the end, the US won the hearts and minds of the Afghan people, making it impossible for the Taliban to operate without making extreme concessions, at the very minimum. This is not to say there will be no blood spilled, but good luck

to the Taliban ever surpassing the reach of the Afghan government achieved with the backing of the entire world. The Taliban may have the watches, but freedom has the time.

The Taliban, as we knew them pre-August 31, 2021, will never succeed. Like in Vietnam, the will of the people to have access to equality, justice, information, quality of life, connectivity, travel, education and business opportunities is and always will be greater than the violence-forced power of extremists. America always wins its wars because America is not a country — it is an idea, and you cannot kill an idea.

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America's Post-9/11 Lessons and Lamentations

Gary Grappo
September 20, 2021

Will Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan finally prove convincingly instructive to prevent the US from undertaking such adventures in the future, however nobly perceived?

Earlier this month, Americans and people around the world commemorated a day that still resonates with disbelief, astonishment and profound sorrow. We don't know how the world will look at the events of 9/11 in 100 years. But, after 20 years, the heaviness persists and the portents remain still unclear.

As if to lend greater somber, the commemoration took place as the US and the world watched America and its allies' tragic and humiliating withdrawal from Afghanistan. No

fiction writer could have written a sadder, more unreal denouement to America's 20-year saga to right the wrongs and assuage the grief of 9/11.

Many commentators have written that 9/11 was for the millennial generation what the assassination of John F. Kennedy was for the boomers. While identifying with the latter group, I found the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, far more consequential. One can grasp how one deranged madman could target an American president. After all, it wasn't the first time in US history. But a band of madmen belonging to an extreme, anti-civilizational group of hate-driven madmen attacking in explosively spectacular fashion office buildings filled with innocent human beings, killing nearly 3,000 and forever upending the lives of tens of thousands of other innocents?

Transformative Moment

As a US diplomat assigned to the State Department on that day, I stood in speechless astonishment on the north bank of the Potomac River barely an hour after the attack on the Pentagon on the other bank. My department had been evacuated just moments before, authorities believing that other terrorist-controlled airliners were still headed toward Washington. A surreal chaos whirled about us in America's capital city. Colleagues and I kept telling ourselves that surely the fire raging across the river with its great billowing clouds of black smoke would soon be extinguished. (It would take days.) But we could never have imagined the impact it would have on our lives and more importantly on the course of a nation.

Countless writers, journalists, experts, pundits and social media junkies have offered up their assessments of how America went from a nation united in confronting that day's tragedy to one divided at home and defeated abroad. It's especially noteworthy because on the day the terrorists struck, America stood at the pinnacle of global supremacy, the hyper-power with a dynamic and ever-growing economy and armed forces unparalleled in history. But it wasn't what

the terrorists did that day that brought the country to this point. Americans — and specifically American leaders — did it to themselves.

Consider America's actions after the attacks that day. Rightly and commendably the country earned the support of virtually every country in the world in going after al-Qaeda. Eliminating it, however, was never a realistic option. As it's often said, an idea can't be killed, and the extremist ideology that drove al-Qaeda then persists today within that organization and the many offshoots it has spawned. But diminishing its capabilities in order to severely constrain its ability to threaten the US or other nations was a realistic goal. And it can be said that it has largely been achieved.

Terrorism is a tactic, not a movement. Whether by the Mafia, Irish Republican Army, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (aka FARC), Lenin and Stalin, Mao's Red Army, or Julius Caesar and his legions rampaging through Gaul, it has been employed often throughout history and often very successfully. It will likely continue. It can be controlled. But as a tactic, like an idea, it is a permanent element of human conflict.

“Unnatural and Unhealthy”

But it wasn't what America did to fight and contain terrorism that necessarily diminished its global power and stature, though missteps were made. It was the two misadventures on which it embarked shortly after 9/11, first in Afghanistan and then in 2003 in Iraq. “It's unnatural and unhealthy for a nation to be engaged in global crusades for some principle or idea while neglecting the needs of its own people.” Had America's leaders bothered to heed that wisdom of former US Senator J. William Fulbright or to consult the volumes of books, articles and reports of the country's history in Vietnam in the 1960s and 70s, the lessons would have been starkly clear. Taking on projects to quell or settle internal insurrection or launch nation-building in countries still struggling for a national identity is a fool's errand.

The lessons of Vietnam were manifestly obvious in Afghanistan. It was and remains a country historically riven by tribal, ethnic and religious strife. No nation has ever succeeded in bringing it under control, certainly not for very long. Outsiders have constantly interfered there because of the disunity. Warlords moved in and out of power in various parts of the country.

It is easy to say with today's 20/20 hindsight that 90 days after expelling both al-Qaeda and the Taliban, the US should have withdrawn from Afghanistan and asked the UN Security Council to take charge of organizing a government. As a superpower outsider, the US was exactly the wrong nation to undertake that task. But, as in Vietnam, impelled by ambition, hubris, arrogance, grand visions and considerable self-deception, America plunged ahead.

Despite its rushed and ignominious departure, America and its allies can take credit for some of their successes (really) in Afghanistan. Education levels, especially among girls, are up considerably. Women have many more opportunities and greater freedom today than in 2001. Afghan infrastructure is much improved. Even the standard of living improved for many Afghans.

Unfortunately, because of the abject failure of the political project, it is unclear whether any of that is sustainable. The history of previous Taliban rule would suggest otherwise. On the other hand, we cannot yet know the impact of America's 20-year Afghanistan enterprise on individual Afghans and their perceptions of themselves and their future, especially women.

Lessons and Lamentations

While Afghanistan may have been seen as a war of necessity at its start, it sadly evolved into one of unachievable expectations. Donald Trump saw it much that way — though with little understanding of its complexities, other than it was far away from America and had little economic value to the US. It was left to Joe Biden to make the painful but inevitable and necessary decision that it was time to leave.

As was done following our Vietnam exit, volumes will now be written about this tragic episode in US history, including by institutions within America's own government. They will be authored by credible and competent scholars and political and military experts. They will be exhaustively researched. They will give blow-by-blow accounts of decisions made, policies adopted, actions taken, and statements, declarations and promises issued. Charts, graphs, maps and statistics will be presented. They will point out the many errors, lies, self-deception and willful blindness. They will also relate the sacrifices of thousands of Americans, most of whose stories will never be known. They will also cite the pains and loss of so many Afghans. And they will all end up with much the same conclusion. America and its allies withdrew after finally confronting one ineluctable reality.

Those studies will offer invaluable insights to Americans and their leaders. But will they learn? Will Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan finally prove convincingly instructive to prevent the country from undertaking such adventures in the future, however nobly perceived?

To listen to and read the never-ending stream of observations on this pregnant moment in the nation's history has become a modern-day version of the Book of Lamentations. Indeed, the country's challenges, internal and external, are manifold and daunting. Heretofore, its democracy held the capacity to absorb, learn, adapt and rebound from its setbacks.

But the question bears repeating if the nation is to move beyond this point in its history. Will it learn?

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The Legacy of America's Failed War on Terror

Kholoud Khalifa & Anas Altikriti
November 22, 2021

In this edition of The Interview, political analyst Anas Altikriti shares his insights into the events in Afghanistan and the war in Iraq.

Twenty years have passed since the 9/11 attacks in the United States. It was in the immediate aftermath that US President George W. Bush declared his infamous "war on terror" and launched a cataclysmic campaign of occupation in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

In 2001, a US-led coalition invaded Afghanistan to dismantle al-Qaeda and search for its leader, Osama bin Laden, who were harbored by the Taliban government. The presence of foreign troops sent al-Qaeda militants into hiding and the Taliban were overthrown.

In declaring his war, Bush gave the international community an unequivocal ultimatum: to either be "with us or against us in the fight against terror." In 2003, he took this a step further. He leveraged his power and convinced US allies that Iraq was a state sponsor of terror and its president, Saddam Hussein, had developed weapons of mass destruction, which posed an imminent threat. It wasn't long before the world found out that this narrative was constructed by the White House as the Bush administration was determined to attack Iraq. The results were devastating: hundreds of thousands of Iraqi deaths, the displacement of over 9 million civilians and the political mayhem that continues to this day.

It has been argued that Islam has been conflated with terrorism not only in the media, but also in much of the political discourse. As a direct result of the war on terror, studies show that an attack by a Muslim perpetrator receives

375% more attention than if the culprit was a non-Muslim.

As these patterns grew with time, countries started to employ their deterrence capacity under the guise of the “war on terror,” only to undermine those who were resisting regimes or seeking self-determination. This was seen in countries like Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Even Russian leader Vladimir Putin, in 2001, quickly persuaded Western leaders that his country faced similar threats from Islamists and was dealt a carte blanche to crack down with brute force on insurgents and civilians alike.

The foreign occupation of Afghanistan ended in August 2021. After 20 grueling and miserable years, the US pulled out from Afghanistan amidst a Taliban takeover, setting a range of events into motion. Chaos filled Kabul Airport as scores of people were desperate to leave the country. The IMF suspended Afghanistan’s access to hundreds of millions in emergency funds due to a “lack of clarity within the international community” over recognizing a Taliban government.

The war led to irreparable damages and hundreds of thousands of Afghans paid with their lives. The US spent over \$2.2 trillion on the conflict and had thousands of its soldiers returned in body bags.

Today, starving families in Afghanistan are selling their babies for money to feed their children and the world only looks on.

To understand how we got here, I spoke to Anas Altikriti, a political analyst, hostage negotiator and the CEO of The Cordoba Foundation, an organization aimed at bridging the gap of understanding between the Muslim world and the West. In this interview, we discuss America’s handling of the occupation and examine Afghanistan’s next steps now that the Taliban has assumed authority in the country.

Kholoud Khalifa: Joe Biden has received a certain amount of backlash from both sides of the aisle for withdrawing abruptly from

Afghanistan. What do you make of his decision?

Anas Altikriti: Looking from an American perspective, I believe Biden had no choice. We tend to forget that the president who actually signed the agreement to leave Afghanistan was Donald Trump and his deadline was May of this year. Technically, you can state that Biden was carrying out a decision made by his predecessor. However, in reality — and I think that this is what’s important — any American president would have found it extremely difficult and utterly senseless to carry on a failed venture. Afghanistan and Iraq were utterly horrendous mistakes. If not at the point of conception and theory, the implementation was horrid.

However, from a purely analytical political point of view, Biden had absolutely no choice. The fact that he was going to come in for so much criticism, and particularly from the American right, is no surprise whatsoever. I would like to assume that Biden’s administration had the capacity to foresee that and to prepare for that, not only in terms of media, but also in terms of trying to argue the political perspective. Although in America today, I don’t think that is really useful.

So, generally speaking, I’m not surprised by the fact that he got attacked, because ultimately speaking, on paper, this was a defeat to the Americans. It was a defeat to the Americans on the 20th anniversary of 9/11, the day in which the idea started to crystallize in terms of those who wanted to see American basis spread far and wide, and the whole intermittent 20 years has been nothing but an utter and an abject failure.

Thousands of American troops have been killed, but on the other side, probably more than a million of Afghan lives have been absolutely decimated — either killed or having to flee their homes and live as refugees elsewhere. The cost has been absolutely incredible, and for that, I think the Americans can contend with themselves, as history will judge this to be a failed attempt from start to finish.

Khalifa: What are your thoughts on the Taliban as a political actor in today's geopolitical landscape?

Altikriti: Well, we'll wait and see. There is no question that from the military point of view, the Taliban won. They achieved the victory, and they managed to expel the Americans and to defeat them not only on the ground, but also at negotiating. For almost the past 12 years, there had been negotiations between the Taliban and the Americans either directly or indirectly, whilst at the same time, the Taliban had been fighting against the American presence in Afghanistan and never conceding for a moment on their objective that they wanted a full and complete withdrawal from Afghanistan. That, itself, is something to be taught at political science departments across the world, and it has definitely affected my own curriculum that I teach to students.

Negotiations, as well as being backed by real power, are things that have proven to be extremely beneficial and quite successful in this particular time. Now, that might be easy in comparison to catering to a nation of 40 million that have been devastated for almost three generations — from oppressive regimes to conflicts, to wars, to civil war, to occupation, to absolute and utter devastation to the rise of violence, ideological militancy, to all sorts of issues that have ravaged that nation.

Governing Afghanistan is going to be a totally different kettle of fish. It's not the same as fighting. You can say that actually fighting a war from mountain tops and caves is relatively easy in comparison with the task ahead. Whether they're going to be successful or not is something that we wait to see, and I hope for the betterment of the Afghan people that they will be.

The reality is the Taliban have won and in today's world, they have the right the absolute right to govern. Hopefully, within the foreseeable future, the Afghan people will have the choice to either hold them to account and lay the blame for whatever economic failures, for instance, or otherwise.

This struggle between nations and their regimes is a continuous one. Thankfully, where we live, in the West, that struggle is mostly done on a political plane. So, we fight politically and we hold our politicians accountable through the ballot boxes. That is not present in many, many developing countries. Afghanistan is definitely a country that needs to find its own model as to how to govern and how to create that kind of balance between people and regime. I think it is utterly hypocritical from the West to prejudge them and hold them to ransom via mistakes that happened in the past. Every administration commits mistakes of varying sorts. Our own government in the UK is now being investigated by an independent inquiry staff as to how it dealt with COVID and whether some of its decisions led to the death of thousands of people. So, mistakes can happen.

The West needs to contend with why they left Afghanistan after 20 years of absolute misery and suffering no better than when they came to it in 2001. That's a question that the West, including the UK, need to ask themselves before passing judgment on to the Taliban.

Khalifa: You mentioned something very interesting. You said we're waiting to see and we cannot judge them right now. Do we see any hints of change? Has today's Taliban changed from the Taliban of the pre-US occupation? For example, the Taliban issued a public pardon on Afghan military forces that had tried to eradicate them.

Altikriti: Well, the hints are plenty and the hints are positive. The fact that the Taliban, as you put it, issued that decree that there won't be any military trials or court marshals being held. The fact that from the very first hours, they said that anyone who wants to leave could leave and they won't stop them, but that they hope everyone will stay to rebuild Afghanistan. I think from a political and PR point of view, that was a very, very shrewd way to lay out the preface of their coming agenda.

The fact that Taliban leaders spoke openly, and I'll be honest, in quite impressive narratives and discourses to foreign media — to the BBC, to Sky — and, in fact, took the initiative to actually phoning up the BBC and intervening and carrying out long and extensive interviews. This has never happened before. We could never have imagined that they sit with female correspondents and presenters and spoke freely and openly. Also, the fact that they met with the Shia communities in Afghanistan at the time when they were celebrating Muharram and assured them that everything was going to be fine.

I think a big part of whether Afghanistan succeeds or not lies in the hands of the West. For instance, in the first 24 hours of the Americans leaving in such a chaotic manner, which exemplified the chaos of the Taliban as we know it, the IMF said that funds to Afghanistan would be withheld. Therein begins that kind of Western hegemony, Western colonization that I believe is at the very heart of many problems in what we termed the Third World or the developing world.

The fact that sometimes nations aren't allowed to progress, they aren't allowed to rise from the ashes, they aren't allowed to recover, they aren't allowed to rebuild, not because of any innate deficiency on their part, but because of the international order that we have today in the world. We have so many restraining legal organizations — from the UN downwards, including the IMF and the World Bank — that hold nations to ransom. Either you behave in a particular way or we're going to withhold what is essentially yours. It's an absolute travesty, but unfortunately, this goes across all our radars. There is very little response in terms of saying, hang on, that is neither just nor fair nor democratic.

If you really, really want the betterment of Afghanistan and Afghan people, countries should be piling in, in order to afford help, to afford aid and to make absolutely sure that the Afghan people have everything they need in order to rebuild for the future.

But, unfortunately, the opposite is happening. We're tying the nation's hands behind its back and saying, we're just going to watch and see how you do in that boxing ring, and if you don't fare well, that will be justification for us to maybe reintervene in one way or another sometime down the line.

Khalifa: After seizing the country, the Taliban promised an inclusive government, with the exception of women. Yet the current government only comprises Taliban members. What are the chances that they deliver on forming an inclusive government?

Altikriti: I'm sort of straddling the line between being an academic and an activist, and I have a foot in both, so it's sometimes a little bit difficult. However, I would suggest that when the Conservative Party in Britain wins an election, it's never assumed that they include people from the Labour Party or Liberal Democrats in their next government. The same goes in America: When the Republicans win an election, you can't reasonably ask or expect of them to include those with incredible minds and capacities from the Democratic Party — you simply don't.

So, the hope for inclusivity in Afghanistan needs to take that into consideration. The Taliban are the winning party — whether by force or by political negotiations — and therefore, they have the right to absolutely build the kind of government they see fit. For them to then reach out to others would be an incredible gesture.

But I think it's problematic and hypocritical if the West doesn't allow the winning party to govern. If after some time it doesn't manage to, then maybe you'd expect it to reach out to others from outside its own party or from outside its own borders and invite them to come and help out. But that's not what you expect from day one.

The fact that they haven't done what many people expected, and I personally have to say I feared would happen, and it hasn't. So, until we find that media stations closed down, radio stations barricaded and people rounded up — and

I hope none of that will happen, but if it does, we hold them to account.

Khalifa: Imran Khan, the prime minister of Pakistan, says the international community must engage with the Taliban, avoid isolating Afghanistan and refrain from imposing sanctions. He says the “Taliban are the best bet to get rid of ISIS.” What’s your view on that?

Altikriti: If we’re looking back at their track record, they were the ones who managed to put an end to the civil war that broke out after the liberation from the Soviet Union. I mean, for about five to six years, Afghanistan was ravaged with a civil war, warlords were running the place amok. I remember an American journalist said the only safe haven in Afghanistan was something like a 20-square-meter room in a hotel in the center of Kabul. The Taliban came in and created a sense of normality, once again in terms of putting an end to the civil war. There remained only one or two factions that were still in resistance, but otherwise, the Taliban managed to actually bring Afghanistan to order.

It was only after 9/11 and the US intervention that returned the country back into a state of chaos. So, if we’re going to take their track record into consideration, then it’s only fair to say that they do have the experience, the expertise and the track record that shows that they can bring some semblance of normality and peace.

Now, obviously, we understand that Afghanistan is not disconnected from its regional map and from the regional politics that are at play, including the Pakistani-Indian conflict. It’s no secret that the Taliban were looked after and maintained by the Pakistani intelligence. I understand from the negotiations that were taking place since 2010 that there was almost always a member of the Pakistani intelligence present at the table. So, it’s not a secret that Pakistan saw that in order to quell the so-called factions that represented the mujahideen, the Taliban were its safest bet.

In that sense and from that standpoint, you would suggest that the Taliban are best equipped. Much of what was going on in Afghanistan was based on cultures, traditions and norms that Americans were never ready to embrace, understand or accept. That’s why they fell foul so many times of incidents, which could have been easily appeased with only a little bit of an understanding and of an appreciation of fine cultural or traditional intricacies and nuances. The Taliban wouldn’t have that issue.

So, you would suggest that what Imran Khan said has some ground to stand on. It’s a viable theory. But everything that we’re talking about will be judged by what see is going to happen. But before we do that, we need to allow the Taliban the time, so that when we come to say, listen, they fail, we have grounds and evidence to issue such a judgment.

Khalifa: I want to shift to the US. So we know that there was a US-led coalition, and its presence for over 20 years in Afghanistan and in the Middle East led to very little change in the region. You already alluded to that at the very beginning. The US spent trillions of dollars and incurred the highest death toll out of the coalition members. What has the US learned from this experience?

Altikriti: I think that’s the question we should be focused on. I fear that it has learned virtually nothing and that’s very worrying. Just like we were passing pre-judgments on the Taliban, we need to do the same everywhere. If that’s the kind of ruler that we’re using to judge a straight line, it’s the same ruler we need to judge every straight line.

We heard the statements that emerged from Washington, and to be perfectly honest, very, very few were of any substance. Ninety-nine percent, and this is my own impression, were about America looking back and how they let down the translators and the workers in the alliance government and left them at their own fate. The tears were shed, both in the British Parliament as well as the American Congress,

which actually shows that these people didn't get it. They didn't get it and that is what worries me the most.

If something as huge as Afghanistan and what happened — this wasn't a car crash that happened in a split second. This was something that was led over the course of the last 17 years and definitely since President Trump signed the agreement with the Taliban in 2020. This should have been a time for politicians and analysts to actually read the situation and read the map properly. But it seems that they never did and they never bothered to see if there was any need or inclination to take lessons from it.

I'm yet to come across a decision-maker, a lawmaker, a politician, a senior adviser to come out and say there were horrendous mistakes carried out by the occupation and by the other alliance governments that led to this, and as a result, we need to learn what to do and not do in future. But there is this arrogance and pride that forbids us from doing so, and as such, they're inclined to make the same mistake time and time and time again.

Khalifa: Given that the so-called war on terror, and more specifically the occupation in Iraq, was an utter failure, what is the probability in your opinion that America will engage in another foreign intervention?

Altikriti: From a purely political view, I find this extremely far-fetched in the foreseeable future. The reasons being that Americans had to endure bruising at every single level and because of the crippling economic crisis. So, it's extremely difficult to launch an intervention or military intervention in the way that we saw in Iraq, Afghanistan or Panama in the next two to three years. But the thing is, often, American politics is driven by corporate America.

I mean, we talk about the trillions spent, but like someone said in an article I read in The Washington Post, that those trillions were more than made up by American corporations, by American oil, by getting their hands on certain minerals in Afghanistan. Even the drug trade

itself, which Britain and America thought they would quell, it was actually the Taliban who brought it under control, who actually went around and burnt the poppy seed farms. The West reinvigorated that tradeline and stabilized it. Therefore, as a friend of a friend tells me, he says many of those who were scrambling for airplanes in Kabul Airport were poppy seed farmers because they knew that they had absolutely no future under the Taliban.

So, once we count the trillions incurred by the taxpayer, we forget that there is another side that you and I probably don't even know that is gaining riches at the expense of the Afghans.

The beast now is to try out new weapons. Lockheed Martin and others will always have a vested interest in trying out the new technology, and what's better than to try it out in real-life situations? If I was to speak to any modern, contemporary, 30-something-year-old military analysts, they'd laugh me off because I'm speaking about a bygone age. We're talking now about wars where we don't involve human beings. I mean, in terms of the assailants, they're flying drones, and there's an intelligence level to it that I can't fathom nor understand.

Another aspect that no one is talking about almost is the privatization of militaries. We're coming now to find brigades, thousands of troops that are mercenaries, people who fight for a wage. Now, this is the new way to fight wars: Why would Britain employ some of its brightest and youngest when it could pay £100 a day to have someone else fight wars on its behalf? And this is now becoming a multibillion-dollar industry. It first started out as a reality in Iraq, when we had the likes of Blackwater who were guarding the airports, presidential palaces and government officials. You'd try to speak to them only to realize they were from Georgia or Mozambique or elsewhere, and they don't fall under the premise of local law. Therefore, if they kill someone by mistake, you can't take them to court and that's the contract you sign. That is where I think the danger lies.

Khalifa: In 2010, you appeared on Al Jazeera’s “Inside Iraq” alongside the late Robert Fisk and Jack Burkman, a Republican strategist. Burkman described Arabs and Muslims as a “bunch of barbarians in the desert” and the Bush administration as the savior bringing change. With its failures in Iraq and Afghanistan, has the US perceptions of Arabs and Muslims changed, and if so, how?

Altikriti: I’d love to have a chat with Jack right now to see what he thinks 11 years on. To answer your question, it saddens me to say that yes, it’s changed, but only because America and American society are so polarized and so divided. It only took Donald Trump to become president or 50% of Americans to defy everything that Trump said. Being anti-Trump meant standing up for Muslims when he issued the Muslim ban for flights. So, people from their standpoint of being anti-Trump said, no, Muslims are welcome. It’s absolutely the wrong way to go on about it. That’s not how we recognize, for instance, that racism is wrong or evil.

However, the fact is that in the past, anti-Muslim sentiments were everywhere and the feelings that Jack Burkman expressed so horribly in that interview were widespread. I personally believe they still remain because 9/11 has become an industry and that industry has many facets to it. Part of it is ideological, part is media, part is educational and obviously part transpires into something that is military or security-based.

We still have Guantanamo. Why is it that the American people aren’t talking about Guantanamo to the extent that they should be? This is something that is on the conscience of every single American citizen — it is paid from their own taxes. Why no one talks about it is simply because no one dares touch the holy grail — the industry of 9/11. It’s a huge, huge problem.

I still believe that those sentiments expressed by Jack back then are still prevalent, but like I said, they were mitigated by the advent of Trump and by his declaration against Arabs and

Muslims. This, as well as the highlighting of certain issues by the left in America, such as the gross crimes committed by the Saudi regime and that’s helped in two ways. Firstly, you expose the crimes committed by Saudis, but it’s also cemented that view that Arabs are barbarians.

Khalifa: Afghanistan wasn’t the only country that suffered. Iraq suffered more dire and devastating consequences from the so-called war on terror. What does a future look like for Iraq now that the US has withdrawn?

Altikriti: Oh, very grim, very, very grim. The Americans haven’t withdrawn — they’re less visible. There are current negotiations regarding the next Iraqi government in the aftermath of the elections that we’ve just had, which shows that the Americans are heavily involved.

Iraq is the playground of Iran. So, therefore, any policy of America or Britain or Europe that involves Iran has to have Iraq in the middle.

There are still about three or four American military bases, and from time to time, we hear the news that certain militias targeted this base or that base where Americans lie. Now, the personnel who are there within the bases might carry ID cards as construction workers, advisers, legal experts, bankers or whatever. But ultimately, they’re all there to represent the best interests of the United States. So, America is still there.

However, Iraq is in dire straits. I think the indices that go around every year that show us levels of corruption, levels of transparency, levels of democracy, levels of happiness of people and satisfaction — Iraq is regarded as one of the 10 worst countries on every single level. I think that shows what’s been done to Iraq and what’s been done to the Iraqi people.

The fact is that we have at least 30% of the Iraqi people living as refugees, either within Iraq or outside of Iraq. The fact that in an election only 20% of the people choose to take part.

You have to ask serious questions. You have to say, OK, so when the Americans accused Iran — and I’m a believer that Iran is the worst of all

players in Iraq. But you have to ask: So you occupied the country, why did you allow it to happen? So, you can't just brush it off and say, well, the Iranian militias and its people and its proxy agents in the sun. Well, what were you doing there? So, I think that, again, what has been done to Iraq and to all Iraqis — regardless of their faith, regardless of their sect, regardless of their ethnicity — all of what has happened is a stain. A huge, huge one on the consciousness of everyone in Britain, America, Spain and all the countries that signed up for this and took part in this, everyone has a responsibility to answer.

I mean, obviously, when we spoke about Afghanistan, we didn't speak about the crimes, the actual crimes that were committed. The one that we come to recognize and know about is the crimes committed by the Australians, where they actually trained the young cadets to shoot at people and kill them to be acknowledged as soldiers. We didn't talk about that because there are so many of those that were committed. To speak not of Arab and Muslim barbarity, but of Western barbarity — that's something I think should be discussed.

Khalifa: In Egypt, it was a military coup in 2013 that overthrew a democratically elected government led by the Muslim Brotherhood. In Tunisia, a constitutional change led to the fall of Ennahda, an Islamist party. In Morocco, it was the people who voted out the Justice and Development Party, which ruled the country for 10 years and suffered a massive defeat in September; they went from having 125 seats to only 12. To juxtapose this, in Afghanistan, the Taliban conquered the country overnight from the US, the most powerful country in the world. What message does this send to Islamist parties in the Muslim world?

Altikriti: Only yesterday, I was discussing this with a group of colleagues, and someone repeated a statement that was sent to me by a fellow of Chatham House. He said to me something quite interesting. He said: "Don't you

see that many around the world, particularly young Muslims, will be looking to Afghanistan — and three months ago in Palestine and what happened there — and think to themselves that the way forward is to carry guns." I said: "Listen, my friend, you're saying it. I'm not."

But in reality, it's unfortunate that many of my own students are saying, "It's been proven." I mean, they say, "you academics, you always talk about empirical evidence. Well, here it is: Politics doesn't work. Democracy doesn't work. The ballot box does not work. What does work? There you go, you have Taliban, you have the militias. So go figure." Unfortunately, that is the kind of discussion that I think will dominate the Muslim scene, particularly the political Muslim scene.

For the next few years, I believe, whilst we analyze political Islam and Islamic parties, whether in Egypt, Morocco or Tunisia, that will be the question. Is it a viable argument to say that these parties will have absolutely no chance, either immediately in the short run or in the long run? In Tunisia, they were allowed to run for about 10 years. In Morocco, they were in government for about 10 years. Before that, they were in opposition and they were thriving. But in Egypt, they weren't allowed to stay for more than a year. So, ultimately, the end is inevitable. So, is it the need to shift and change tactics? It's going to be quite an interesting and, at times, problematic discussion, but it's a discussion you need to have.

And last, by the way, on this particular point, the West did not allow democracy, particularly in Egypt and in Tunisia, to exist. We spoke of democracy, we spoke of human rights, we spoke of freedoms, but when they all came to be crushed, the West did absolutely nothing, which told the others well, you know what? They don't care, there are no consequences, and that is why it is that many, many Muslim youth today will say, well, there's only one way to go there.

Khalifa: And lastly, what do you believe are the core causes for Islamic extremist groups,

i.e., Daesh or al-Qaeda, to still have a foothold in the region, and in your opinion, what is the best way to combat these groups?

Altikriti: Their biggest arguments, and which works well for them, is the fact that democracy failed and that they got nothing from buying into Western values of how to run their societies.

Their biggest argument now will be the Taliban and how they won. So, those are the main standpoints [for] these extremist groups; they lie on people's frustrations and their feelings that there is no other way out. That's essentially the argument. I've seen it in groups where someone is trying to recruit for that idea. Their bottom line is it doesn't work. There is no other way — that's their only argument.

It's not theological, by the way. People think they are basing it on these Quranic verses or on hadiths [sayings of Prophet Muhammad], but they absolutely do not, because on that particular front, they lose, they have no ground to stand on. [For them,] it's the fact that, in reality, it doesn't work — democracy doesn't work. Human rights doesn't work. Because ultimately, your human rights mean nothing to those in power. So, killing us is as easy as killing a chicken. It's nothing. That is their argument.

So, it's going to be a struggle, it's going to be a big, big, big struggle for people who want to advocate democracy, want to advocate civil society and diversity. It's a struggle we can't afford not to have, we can't afford not to be in there, because the outcome, the costs will be so hefty on every single part and no one will be excluded.

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