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20 YEARS ON FROM 9/11: War impossible, peace improbable

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Two decades on from 9/11, as the consequences of the chaotic US withdrawal from Afghanistan emerge, it is worth taking stock of the “War on Terror” George W. Bush began back in 2001.

The speed of the Afghan government’s collapse and the Taliban’s return to power after 20 years fighting US troops and their allies raise questions over the sense and pertinence of the war.

In counter-terrorism terms, rather than eliminating the jihadist terrorist threat, the War on Terror has contributed to it spreading around the world and has led to significant setbacks in terms of human rights and individual and collective freedoms.

First Afghanistan, then Iraq. Two decades on from the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001 (9/11), the president of the United States has made two highly symbolic decisions: on the one hand withdrawing US troops from Afghanistan and on the other ending combat operations in Iraq. In so doing, Joe Biden brings an end to the so-called “war on terror” begun by George W. Bush. The main objectives have been achieved, he **says** in justification: find Osama Bin Laden, the mastermind of 9/11, and eliminate the terrorist threat to the United States posed by Al Qaeda in Afghanistan.

Washington may have thought that its military mission in Afghanistan was complete, but the chaotic withdrawal of international troops from the country, the Taliban seizing Kabul as the Afghan government collapsed and the scenes of desperation and horror at the airport as thousands of Afghans sought to flee the country leave an aftertaste of defeat. The Al Qaeda leader was assassinated in May 2011, so the first can be said to have been achieved, but what about the war on terror’s other goals? Has transnational terrorism been weakened? What did the international interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq achieve?

These are the questions this *Nota Internacional* seeks to answer. The title “War impossible, peace improbable” is a reworking of Raymond Aron’s

1948 description of the Cold War (*Paix Impossible, Guerre Improbable*). Analysing the two decades of international intervention in Afghanistan that followed 9/11, the absence of a winner and the persistence of a loser – the Afghan people – gives the impression of a senseless war. Far from bringing an end to jihadist terrorism, these interventions have contributed to its expansion and consolidation on several continents. As a knock-on effect, across the Middle East, North Africa and the West the war on terror has served as a pretext for strengthening authoritarian policies and restricting fundamental liberties like press freedom. A US administration determined to impose democracy through armed force had no qualms about fabricating the evidence to support its actions, making post-truth another Bush legacy.

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Two decades in Afghanistan, for what?

Ana Ballesteros Peiró, Associate Senior Researcher, CIDOB

The seeds of the situation in Afghanistan prior to 9/11 were sown decades earlier. To stop the expansion of the Soviet Union, the US, Saudis and Pakistanis formed an alliance that brought counterproductive changes to the region. Jihad against the Soviets was encouraged, leaving ideological remnants that lingered long after their withdrawal. That is how the intervention of the 1980s inadvertently laid the ground for the transition from the Cold War to the “war on terror”.

With Osama bin Laden on Afghan soil, the aim was to destroy Al Qaeda, drive the Taliban from power in Kabul and neutralise the ability for attacks to be committed from Afghanistan on the US and allied countries. Among other objectives, George W. Bush also listed helping Afghan people develop and form an inclusive government in which women could participate.

But a string of errors damaged the mission from the start, among them the indecent exhibition of military power and the government’s alliance with warlords with records of committing war crimes. Decisions made early on also destroyed any chance of reaching an agreement with the Taliban while avoiding the kind of humiliation that could provoke future desires for revenge. The miscalculation with Pakistan also hindered the effectiveness of the intervention by the **International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)**. If Bush set out to go after nations giving succour to terrorism, he picked the wrong ally: Pakistan hosted as many members of the Taliban and **Al Qaeda (including Bin Laden)** as Afghanistan.

Three presidents down the line, **with 775,000 troops dispatched, over 2,300 soldiers killed and around \$2.2 trillion** spent, the signing of the Doha Agreement in February 2020 was a tacit admission by the United States of stalemate, if not defeat. But the rush to reach an agreement to accelerate the withdrawal – largely driven by Donald Trump’s electoral interests – ended up giving legitimacy to the Taliban and damaging the position of the Afghan government.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki admitted on July 8th 2021 that as the war had “not been won militarily” there would be no “**mission accomplished moment**”. Meanwhile, in a speech that differed notably from the one given by George W. Bush on September 20th 2001, Joe Biden argued that the only reasons for intervening in Afghanistan were to halt Al Qaeda, prevent future terrorist attacks and deal with Bin Laden, all of which had been achieved. Speaking later, Biden even denied that the US had ever sought to build a “unified, centralized democracy” as well as dismissing any responsibility for the human rights situation. The president also did not hesitate to name the previous Kabul government as the main culprit for the situation.

What there can be little doubt about is who the losers are: the Afghan people and particularly the women, once so symbolic for the international intervention.

Afghanistan and the end of Western leadership

Pol Bargaés, Research Fellow, CIDOB

With the dramatic withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, Joe Biden brings to a close the longest war in US history, the “**forever war**” that has irrevocably changed international intervention. In his words of August 31st 2021, this is the end of “an era of major military operations to remake other countries”.

Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the United States and the United Kingdom invaded Afghanistan to defeat Al Qaeda and overturn the Taliban government that was sheltering it. The fighting barely lasted two months before the Taliban were removed from power and a transitional government led by Hamid Karzai was imposed. In December of the same year, the UN gave authorisation to ISAF, a mission in which NATO oversaw the process of democratising and rebuilding the country's governance institutions while providing security and helping to develop the Afghan military and police forces.

It soon became clear that few of the promises could be kept. Al Qaeda was swiftly weakened, but other terrorist networks emerged stronger. Attempts were made to create security, but control and stability were barely even achieved in Kabul. Firm commitments were made to democratisation and liberalisation, but the institutions were always precarious, inefficient and tainted by corruption and nepotism. Karzai, nominated to lead the political renewal, won two presidential elections (in 2004 and 2009), but ended up being a problem himself. Mired, like much of the country's political elite, in networks of corruption, he also figured in electoral scandals, resisted the **2001 Bonn Agreement** to rebuild the state and appeared distant to a local population who often saw him as a puppet of Western forces. Images of **exhausted soldiers** who had lost faith in the cause they were defending and the allegations emerging from the military prisons of Guantanamo and **Bagram** dissipated the initial legitimacy granted to the war on terror. Indefinite imprisonments without trial took place, along with numerous human rights violations, including **torture and disappearances**.

In 2009, the Barack Obama presidency gave the war renewed impetus. Troop numbers rose and fighting with the Taliban increased in remote regions to the east and south of the country. Attempts were also made to increase the participation of Afghans, strengthen local governance and help the people meet their most immediate needs. In 2011, rapprochement and dialogue began between the Taliban and the Afghan government under international auspices. But progress towards national unity over these ten years has been very slow. The February 2020 peace agreement between the Americans and the Taliban did not resolve the instability and conflict and since the announcement in April 2021 that international troops would be withdrawn, the Taliban have taken province after province, defeating an incapacitated Afghan

army apparently lacking the motivation to defend the country. After conquering Kabul and taking the airport following the international troops' withdrawal, the Taliban declared themselves victorious in the war.

According to *The Economist*, the war was a "**crushing defeat**" that claimed **230,000 victims** (including 3,586 NATO soldiers and 78,314 civilians) and cost the US **\$2.2 trillion** (Spain spent about **€3.5 billion**). As one returning Spanish soldier put it, to the Afghans **the international forces were aliens**. Isolated on military bases with armoured vehicles and gadgets from science fiction, protected by noisy helicopters and drones in the skies, they were always strangers to the local people. That distance made them incapable of decisively influencing the country's political transformation.

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The "**unwinnable**" war has brought an end to Western-led international interventions. Americans and Europeans no longer have the confidence and resources to promote regime change and establish a "liberal democracy" in a country like Afghanistan. One of the lessons learned is that peace cannot be consolidated and countries cannot be built only from the outside.

The end of a war, but not of terror

Moussa Bourekba, Researcher, CIDOB

In his landmark post-9/11 **speech** to the United States Congress, George W. Bush warned that "Americans should not expect one battle, but a lengthy campaign, unlike any other we have ever seen". Two decades on, the facts of the so-called war on terror sadly confirm his intuition: according to a **study** by Brown University (USA), the war has claimed over 800,000 lives – including 312,000 civilians – caused 21 million to become displaced and affected more than 80 countries. The United States and its allies won early military victories in Afghanistan and Iraq, but the global panorama suggests that, far from being eradicated, transnational terrorism has been consolidated and spread to dozens of countries around the world.

What began as a fight against Al Qaeda, an organisation then comprising a few hundred fighters, became an everlasting war against a decentralised global network

that is difficult to locate and in perpetual expansion. Neither the intervention in Afghanistan (2001–2021) nor the invasion of Iraq (2003–2011) brought an end to it, and they **remain the two countries most impacted** by terrorism in the world. In Afghanistan, where the Taliban control most of the territory, Al Qaeda has stepped up its presence, while an Islamic State (IS) branch (IS Khorasan) was established in 2015. In Iraq, the US occupation, punctuated by various scandals like **Abu Ghraib**, was tragically followed by the proclamation of a “caliphate” in Syria and Iraq (2014–2017) – a dream beyond the imaginings of even the leaders of Al Qaeda.

9/11 produced **global consensus** on the fight against transnational terrorism. But, while many jihadist leaders, such as Osama bin Laden, Abu Bakr Baghdadi and Abdelmalek Droukdel, have been killed, the groups they led remain highly active in the region. And, what is more, jihadism, now a political–religious ideology, a transnational project and a movement, has taken advantage of the conditions created by the disastrous mismanagement of the military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq and the emergence of new

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conflict hotspots in Libya (2011), Mali (2012) and Yemen (2014) to spread from the Sahel to Southeast Asia, taking in the Horn of Africa and northern parts of Kenya, Mozambique and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The result is that the number of jihadists in the world has **quadrupled** since the attacks on the Twin Towers.

As well proliferating and consolidating themselves in various unstable areas, jihadist groups have adapted to the post-9/11 context. Over the last decade, several have given up on the idea of “global jihad” in order to dedicate themselves to “local jihad”, which consists of administering and governing territories according to the precepts of jihadist Salafism. So many jihadist groups have experimented with proto-states in Afghanistan, Libya, Iraq, Mali, Syria, Somalia and Yemen that the clear and resounding desire to end jihadist terrorism seems to have receded and policymakers now limit themselves to the more realistic goal of containing the spread of such groups.

So, two decades on from 9/11, what Obama called the “jihadist cancer” has metastasised on several continents and there are no signs of remission. It is hardly surprising, in this context, that Joe Biden, unable to eradicate “terror” as his predecessor promised, is content to bring the “war on terror” to a close and turn the page on the longest conflict in US history.

The Middle East and North Africa: winners and losers

Eduard Soler i Lecha, Senior Research Fellow, CIDOB

Al Qaeda’s 9/11 attacks altered the balance of power in several struggles that remain key to the configuration of the regional order to this day: the competition between regional powers, between authoritarianism and the desire for democratic change, and between the United States and the powers aspiring to challenge its global hegemony.

Saudi Arabia came off badly in the competition between regional powers. The leader of Al Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, was a Saudi citizen, as were 15 of the 19 terrorists who carried out the attacks. In the United States, questions were asked about the alliance with Riyadh and the terrorists’ connections and support in Saudi Arabia were the subject of a **classified investigation**. The Saudi monarchy attempted to distance itself from bin Laden, denied any kind of complicity and sought to present a gentler image of the kingdom by, for example, promoting the 2002 **Arab peace initiative**. But echoes of the huge reputational damage it suffered continue to resonate 20 years on.

Saudi Arabia’s setback became an opportunity for Iran, its main regional rival. Jihadism replaced the Islamic Republic as the United States’ main enemy in the region, albeit temporarily, and the two wars the US was about to launch against Iran’s neighbours in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) ousted the Taliban and Saddam Hussein, with whom Tehran had poor relations. The dismantling of the Ba’athist system in Iraq was accompanied by a humiliating occupation, and new areas of influence also opened up for the Iranians and their so-called “**Axis of Resistance**”. In 2004 King **Abdullah II** of Jordan warned of the emergence of an arc of Shiite influence stretching from Beirut to the Persian Gulf with the potential to destabilise Arab countries. The terms he used exemplify another of 9/11’s secondary effects: the normalisation of sectarian–religious readings of the conflicts in the Middle East.

The other major battle took place within the states in

the region. In Washington some politicians and think tanks promoted the interventions in Afghanistan or Iraq by claiming – and some possibly believing – that they would promote democracy. However, they had the opposite effect. The region's authoritarian regimes merely had to label dissidents as terrorists in order to deploy exceptional measures to neutralise them and buy the silence and support of their Western partners. The fight against terrorism and cooperation on migration issues are the pillars on which a transactional relationship has been built at the expense of defending human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Israel, which defines itself as the “region's only democracy”, also invoked the anti-terrorist narrative to justify building its separation wall and its selective assassination policy, helping it consolidate its territorial expansion and discredit the Palestinian National Authority and its leader, Yasser Arafat, who was accused of being an accessory to terrorism. Thus, the Palestinian cause also joins the long list of losers from 9/11.

Finally, 9/11 was the start of a long phase in which the United States was worn down by costly military interventions. Anti-Americanism, already present in the Middle East and North Africa before 2001, found a fertile breeding ground. Americans at home also showed signs of fatigue and demanded an end to wars in which victory was hard to achieve. As a result, the United States was forced to retreat, troops were withdrawn and its “red lines” were loosened, as the war in Syria showed years later. Resurgent powers like Russia and China saw the opportunity and over the past 20 years have set about presenting themselves as useful partners for states in the region seeking to resist US pressure and those looking to diversify their international support.

War on the press

Carne Colomina, Research Fellow, CIDOB

9/11 made terror a global media spectacle and event. The attacks on the financial heart of the United States were broadcast on live television and out of that vulnerability a wave of patriotism surged up that blanketed everything. The media was dragged into a position in which it completely lost the distance needed for objective reporting – the “death of detachment”, in Brian McNair's words. A few weeks later, the United States Congress approved the USA Patriot Act, which, as well as establishing a generalised surveillance system, also imposed a state of exception when it came to pursuing anything considered “unpatriotic”. Not only did this increase the risk of self-censorship, it also restricted journalists' access to critical information and violated their right to protect their sources.

With the semantic trap of the “war on terror” deployed to legitimise what was to follow, an implicit expectation of the media's patriotic duty was imposed on the war coverage. Afghanistan contained all the ingredients to reinforce Western stereotypes. War as spectacle, as rehearsed in the first Iraqi war in 1991, went to a new level. One internal CNN document gave precise instructions to correspondents and presenters that due to the high number of innocent lives lost in the United States, they should be careful not to focus excessively on any casualties and hardships that might occur in Afghanistan and which would, after all, be an inevitable part of the war. On November 13th 2001, the day the Taliban withdrew from Kabul due to the entry of Northern Alliance troops, a US missile destroyed the offices of the Arab TV station Al Jazeera in the Afghan capital.

Press freedom was a threat. So was factual truth. An administration determined to impose democracy through armed force had no qualms about fabricating the evidence that should support such actions. Meanwhile, when Secretary of State Colin Powell alleged at the United Nations on February 5th 2003 that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction much of the mainstream US media swallowed it whole. The second Iraq war went on to become the deadliest in history for journalists and led to far-reaching changes to the coverage of conflicts. The proliferation of reporters embedded within the US military clearly limited access to alternative sources and created the obvious risk of the coverage of those guaranteeing the journalist's safety being uncritical, to put it mildly.

When analysing the Bush administration's communication policy the journalist Eric Alterman dubbed it the “**Post-truth Presidency**”. Alterman was seeking to define a period and a team that had rewritten the rules of democratic discourse, including a disregard for proven facts and greater use of official secrecy (the number of classified public documents rose by 75%). As such, the war on the press that Donald Trump later perfected, exploited and took to another level with the help of social media is a Bush legacy. Four presidential campaigns, eight congressional elections and the longest war in American history separate the two Republican leaders. But the political transformation, erosion of the media, exploitation of fear and otherness and disregard for the truth under Bush all paved Trump's path to the White House. In fact, Trump was one of the amplifiers of the lies and conspiracy theories around 9/11, starting with the allegation that he witnessed “thousands and thousands” of Muslims in New Jersey celebrating the fall of the Twin Towers. Twenty years on, the lies and conspiracies around those attacks continue to circulate on the internet, something from which the large digital platforms draw significant **revenues**.

Even today, the Western policy response to disinformation shares a troubling affinity with the response to post-9/11 terrorism: “a reflexive tendency to see both terrorism and misinformation as nuisance phenomena that should be repressed, rather than symptoms of underlying sociopolitical maladies that should be redressed”, in the words of [Alexei Abrahams](#) and [Gabrielle Lim](#) of the Harvard Kennedy School. This new “war” fighting other “actors of evil” could, once again, end up irreparably damaging freedom of expression.