

# **Failures and Future Strategies in the War on Terrorism**

by

William Hubbell

## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this paper is to determine the appropriate way to deal with the problem of Islamic terrorism in the West in general, and the U.S. in particular. The first section of the paper briefly describes the evolution of Islamic terrorism. The second section details some of the reasons that the response, to the present, must be counted a failure. The remainder of the paper outlines a new strategy toward dealing with the threat, one which has a much greater chance of success than the strategies employed hitherto. There are two key components of the new strategy. The first is to take seriously the not inconsiderable problem of defining the term “terrorism.” Supplying a correct and useful definition is much more difficult than one might at first suppose. The next section of the paper discusses this matter. The second component of the new strategy is to focus attention on the actual motivations of Al Qaeda and other Islamic terrorist organizations that have sought to target the U.S. The following two sections of the paper discuss these motivations and summarize what careful attention to the definition of “terrorism” and the motivations of Islamic radicals suggest as to the best way forward in dealing with Islamic terrorism. The research question the paper poses, and tries to answer, is: What is the best way to reduce or eliminate the threat that Islamic terrorism poses to the West in general and the U.S. in particular? The best way to do this is to pay careful attention to the nature of terrorism, on the one hand, and the actual motivations of Islamic radicals, on the other. The solution proposed has the advantage of treating the actual cause of Islamic terrorism, rather than merely trying to deal with its symptoms.

**Keywords:** GWOT, extremism, terrorism, Enduring Freedom

## Fracazos y estrategias futuras en la guerra contra el terrorismo

### RESUMEN

El propósito de este documento es determinar la forma adecuada de abordar el problema del terrorismo islámico en Occidente en general y en los Estados Unidos en particular. La primera sección del documento describe brevemente la evolución del terrorismo islámico. La segunda sección detalla algunas de las razones por las que la respuesta, hasta el presente, debe ser contada como un fracaso. El resto del documento describe una nueva estrategia para hacer frente a la amenaza, que tiene muchas más posibilidades de éxito que las estrategias empleadas hasta ahora. Hay dos componentes clave de la nueva estrategia. La primera es tomarse en serio el nada despreciable problema de definir el término “terrorismo”. Proporcionar una definición correcta y útil es mucho más difícil de lo que se podría suponer en un principio. La siguiente sección del documento trata este asunto. El segundo componente de la nueva estrategia es centrar la atención en las motivaciones reales de Al Qaeda y otras organizaciones terroristas islámicas que han tratado de atacar a los EE. UU. Las siguientes dos secciones del documento analizan estas motivaciones y resumen la atención cuidadosa a la definición de “terrorismo” y las motivaciones de los radicales islámicos sugieren la mejor manera de abordar el terrorismo islámico. La pregunta de investigación que plantea el artículo y trata de responder es: ¿Cuál es la mejor manera de reducir o eliminar la amenaza que el terrorismo islámico representa para Occidente en general y para Estados Unidos en particular? La mejor manera de hacerlo es prestar cuidadosa atención a la naturaleza del terrorismo, por un lado, ya las motivaciones reales de los radicales islámicos, por el otro. La solución propuesta tiene la ventaja de tratar la causa real del terrorismo islámico, en lugar de tratar simplemente de tratar sus síntomas.

**Palabras clave:** GWOT, extremismo, terrorismo, Libertad Duradera

## 反恐战争的失败与未来战略

### 摘要

本文旨在确定用于应对西方（尤其是美国）伊斯兰恐怖主义问题的适当方法。本文的第一部分简要描述了伊斯兰恐怖主

义的演变。第二部分详细说明了部分原因，即目前的响应必须被视为失败。本文的其余部分概述了一项应对威胁的新战略，与迄今为止采用的战略相比，该战略成功的机会大得多。新战略有两个关键组成部分。第一是认真对待“恐怖主义”定义这一重要问题。提供一个正确且有用的定义比人们最初想象的要困难得多。本文的下一节将探讨该问题。新战略的第二个组成部分是关注基地组织和其他试图以美国为目标的伊斯兰恐怖组织的实际动机。本文接下来的两个部分探讨了这些动机并总结了对“恐怖主义”定义和伊斯兰激进分子动机的关注在“未来应对伊斯兰恐怖主义的最佳方式”方面意味着什么。本文提出并试图回答的研究问题是：减少或消除伊斯兰恐怖主义对整个西方国家（尤其是美国）构成的威胁的最佳方法是什么？完成此举的最佳方法是一方面密切关注恐怖主义的性质，另一方面密切关注伊斯兰激进分子的实际动机。本文提出的解决方案的优势在于，其应对了伊斯兰恐怖主义的真正原因，而不是仅仅试图应对其症状。

关键词：全球反恐战争，极端主义，恐怖主义，持久自由军事行动

---

## Introduction

On September 11, 2001, Al Qaeda operatives hijacked four commercial airliners in the United States and attempted to strike four targets. The first two attempts were successful, flying into and destroying the two main towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. The second attempt was only partially successful, flying into the Pentagon but inflicting maximum damage, which was presumably the intention. The fourth airplane, largely due to the efforts of the passengers, failed to reach its target. No one knows for certain what the target was, but the two most likely targets were the

White House and the Capitol building in Washington, D.C. The attacks were astonishing to most Americans, not excluding the various intelligence agencies. It turns out that there was probably sufficient intelligence to learn of the plan and to stop it. But due to various errors, especially of interagency cooperation and the sharing of intelligence, the intelligence community failed to foresee and stop the attacks.<sup>1</sup> To most Americans, who had no idea that Islamic terrorism, if they were aware of it at all, it seemed completely nonsensical that Al Qaeda should target the U.S. The Bush administration's response, then and later, offered the American people little if any insight as to the actual rea-

---

1 Garrett Graff, "After 9/11, the U.S. got Almost Everything Wrong." *The Atlantic*, 8 September 2021.

sons behind the attack. Osama bin Laden published an open letter to America in the British press, explaining in some detail the reasons that his organization targeted the U.S. But not only was this letter not published in America, then or later, but it is very difficult to find any mention at all of it the domestic mainstream press.

What followed is now familiar to us all. The U.S. declared a “war on terror,” two of the largest components of which were the invasions and occupations of Afghanistan (in 2001), and Iraq (in 2003). Most officials and scholars agree that these steps, even when taken together with other components of the response, such as the formation of the Department of Homeland Security, did little to solve the problem of Islamic terrorism in the West. Some have argued, indeed, that the response only increased resentment and hatred of the U.S. on the part of Islamic radicals—and thereby made the country less safe, rather than safer, from the threat of Muslim extremism.

The purpose of this paper is to determine the appropriate way to deal with the problem of Islamic terrorism in the West in general, and the U.S. in particular. The first section of the paper briefly describes the evolution of Islamic terrorism. The second section details some of the reasons that the response, to the present, must be counted a failure. The remainder of the paper outlines a new strategy toward dealing with the threat, one which has a much greater chance of success than the strategies employed hitherto. There are two

key components of the new strategy. The first is to take seriously the not inconsiderable problem of defining the term “terrorism.” Supplying a correct and useful definition is much more difficult than one might at first suppose. The next section of the paper discusses this matter. The second component of the new strategy is to focus attention on the actual motivations of Al Qaeda and other Islamic terrorist organizations that have sought to target the U.S. The next two sections of the paper discuss these motivations and summarize what careful attention to the definition of “terrorism” and the motivations of Islamic radicals suggest as to the best way forward in dealing with Islamic terrorism. The research question the paper poses, and tries to answer, is: What is the best way to reduce or eliminate the threat that Islamic terrorism poses to the West in general and the U.S. in particular. The thesis of the paper is that the best way to do this is to pay careful attention to the nature of terrorism, on the one hand, and the actual motivations of Islamic radicals, on the other. The solution proposed has the advantage of treating the actual cause of Islamic terrorism, rather than merely trying to deal with its symptoms.

## **The Evolution of Strategy in the “War on Terror”**

**T**he U.S. took many steps, some of which have already been mentioned, in the early years and decades of the so-called “war on terror” following the 9/11 attacks. Airport security was dramatically increased, the

DHS was formed, and many military actions were undertaken—including not only the invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, but drone strikes over much of the world. Special consideration must be given to two intelligence approaches that were utilized during the war. These are SIGINT (Signals Intelligence) and HUMINT (Human Intelligence).<sup>2</sup>

SIGINT is the provision of “foreign signals intelligence.” This is intelligence based on the monitoring of certain other nations’ intelligence and other information and is largely carried out by the National Security Agency (NSA). As the NSA describes it,

“Our SIGINT mission is specifically limited to gathering information about international terrorists and foreign powers, organizations, or persons. NSA produces intelligence in response to formal requirements levied by those who have an official need for intelligence, including all departments of the Executive Branch of the United States government.”<sup>3</sup>

One notes the “specific limitation” mentioned in this passage, together with the fact that the information said to be gathered has virtually no limitation. This evokes another aspect of the “war on terror,” which is the severe reduction

in privacy on the part of foreign nations and the American people, that became part of the war on terror, especially as pertains to the so-called Patriot Act. This legislation legalized nearly any kind of surveillance, in virtually any part of the world, and of virtually any people. Many have argued that limitations on privacy are some of the most significant casualties of the war on terror. This would be one thing if these limitations did in fact make the world a safer place. As will be argued in the next section of the paper, however, it is far from clear that this is the case.

The other main kind of intelligence that must be described here is HUMINT.<sup>4</sup> This is intelligence derived from human sources. HUMINT is the stuff of many espionage films and books. Intelligence operatives develop “sources,” or people who have inside information on foreign governments or terrorist organizations. In reality, however, HUMINT is not exhausted, or even primarily constituted by, the development of covert sources. As one discussion notes, “most of HUMINT collection is performed by overt collectors such as strategic debriefers and military attaches. It is the oldest method for collecting information, and until the technical revolution of the mid- to late 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was the primary source of intelligence.”<sup>5</sup> The remaining kinds

2 “What is Intelligence?” *Office of the Director of National Intelligence*, 2018. <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/what-we-do/what-is-intelligence>

3 “Signals Intelligence Activities.” *DNI.gov*, 2018. <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ppd-28/CIA.pdf>

4 “What is Intelligence?” *op. cit.*

5 *Ibid.*, 3.

of intelligence will be only briefly mentioned here. IMINT is imagery intelligence, most of which is today supplied by satellites. MASINT is intelligence derived from quantitative and qualitative analysis of physical attributes of targets.<sup>6</sup> And OSINT is open-source intelligence, gathered from publicly available sources such as magazines, journals, commercial databases, and radio and television.<sup>7</sup>

## Islamic Terrorism

The Middle East has long been one of the areas in the world most negatively affected by colonialism and imperialism.<sup>8</sup> The Islamic resentment of the West and the U.S. has its historical roots in these negative effects. Al Qaeda and other groups like it were created and staffed mostly by Arab Muslims. But we should be careful to understand two neglected facts about these matters. First, not all Muslims in the Middle East are Arabs. Most of the Muslims in Iran, for example, are Persians rather than Arabs. Second, the majority of the world's Muslims are found, not in the Middle East, but in Asia—principally India and Indonesia. One must not suppose, therefore, that all Muslims in the Middle East are Ar-

abs; or that most Muslims live in the Middle East. In particular, it is crucial to understand that the number of Islamic radicals that in some way participate in terrorist activities against the West or the U.S. is a tiny fraction of the world's total Muslim population. Muslims in general are no more likely to be terrorists than are Jews or Christians.<sup>9</sup>

The more proximate sources of anti-Western sentiment on the part of some Middle Eastern Muslims are to be found in the twentieth century.<sup>10</sup> At least from the second half of this century, colonialism and imperialism were supposed to have ceased. In reality, however, they have only taken different forms. As will become clear, the 9/11 terrorist attacks were in fact motivated by colonialism or neo-colonialism in the Middle East on the part of the U.S. In any case, the American response to the 9/11 attacks is very often described as increasing, rather than decreasing, the threat of Islamic terrorism in the world. For example, one discussion notes that “the 9/11 attacks instantly increased US counterterrorism funding ... and ushered in a period in which Washington—once again—sought to remove administrations it suspected harboured or supported jihadists, often worsening the situation.”<sup>11</sup> The author proceeds to

---

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Robert Gilpin, “War is too Important to be Left to Ideological Amateurs.” *International Relations*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2005, pp. 5-18.

9 Ibid.

10 Mark Landler, “20 Years on, the War on Terror Grinds Along, with No End in Sight.” *The New York Times*, 10 September 2021.

11 Ibid., 2.

note that two decades after 9/11 “the Al Qaeda franchise is still vibrant in several countries”.<sup>12</sup> It is primarily because the U.S. response to the 9/11 attacks made the threat of Islamic radicalism more acute and widespread that a new and different approach to dealing with Islamic terrorism is needed.

## A New Approach

Given that the war on terror to this point has not been successful, it is worth pondering a different way of combating radical Islamic terrorism. The remainder of the paper will make suggestions concerning how this might be done. The focus will be on, first, defining terrorism; and, second, understanding the motivations of Islamic extremists who target the U.S. and the West more generally.

### *Defining “Terrorism”*

To a first approximation, terrorism is systematic violence, often targeting civilian populations, in the service of a political goal.<sup>13</sup> However, there is a basic dilemma that confronts any attempt to be much more specific than this. On the one hand, many assume that terrorism is never justified; that it is always morally wrong. On the other hand, many state-sanctioned violent events would

seem to qualify as terrorism. The challenge, if one insists upon regarding terrorism as always morally wrong, is to define it in such a way that state action, for example by the U.S., does not meet the definition.<sup>14</sup>

A recent report from the Rand Cooperation suggests that the first step in defeating terrorism is to come up with an adequate definition of it. The report notes:

“There are longstanding issues with defining an act of terror. Those problems are exacerbated today by numerous factors, including mutations in ‘traditional’ right-wing ideology which complicate the ability of governments to recognize right-wing acts of violence as terrorist acts. These mutations are aided by core characteristics of social media platforms, such as anonymity, the ease with which information is posted and shared, the wide audiences that can be reached, and the inherent difficulties with tracing the source of the information.”<sup>15</sup>

While the passage mostly concerns right-wing ideology and terrorism—normally racist violence reacting against the perceived excesses of multiculturalism—it applies more broadly, including

12 Ibid.

13 Alan Green, “Defining Terrorism: One Size Fits All?” *International and Comparative Law*, vol. 2, 2017, pp. 441-440.

14 Ibid.

15 Diana Dascalu and Benedict Wilkinson, “Defining ‘Terrorism’ is the First Step to Defeating it.” *The Rand Corporation*, 8 November 2021. <https://www.rand.org/blog/2021/11/defining-terrorism-is-the-first-step-to-defeating-it.html>; 4.

application to Islamic terrorism. Until we know what terrorism is, precisely, it will be difficult or impossible to craft an appropriate response to it.<sup>16</sup>

The discussion will begin by considering a couple of proposed definitions of “terrorism.” The United Nations recently defined terrorism as follows. Terrorism is a criminal act, or series of acts, that “provoke a state of terror in the general public, a group of persons or particular persons for political purposes ... that are in any circumstances unjustifiable ... [motivated by] political, philosophical, ideology, racial, ethnic, or religious considerations”.<sup>17</sup> This definition clearly builds-in to it the idea that terrorism is always and everywhere wrong. This accords with how the notion is normally understood by laypeople and policymakers. It also includes the provision that terrorism is always a criminal act. One problem with this definition is that many state-sanctioned or state-executed acts of violence fit the definition. The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, for example, was a violation of international law. Iraq posed no danger to the U.S., and the official reasons for the invasion, discussed briefly above, were uniformly false or confused. Many people would be unhappy to consider the invasion, and the dozens of similar actions that have been undertaken over the decades, as an act of terrorism.<sup>18</sup>

One response to this criticism would be to tinker with the definition in such a way that the invasion of Iraq is excluded by the definition.<sup>19</sup> One way to do this, sometimes employed by official American agencies such as the FBI and CIA, is to include the notion of a “foreign” group of set of individuals. So, we could take the definition given in the previous paragraph and add that terrorism is always committed by foreign powers or groups of individuals. This meets the desideratum that the invasion of Iraq not be included as an example of terrorism. However, the revised definition is implausible. If other nations can commit acts of violence that count as terrorism, then presumably the U.S. can as well (whether or not it has actually committed terrorist acts). Another attempted fix would be to include a specification pertaining to morality. Thus, one could add to the definition the specification that all terrorist acts are morally wrong. If one does not think that the invasion of Iraq was morally wrong, then it would be excluded by the revised definition. But there are a couple of problems with the resulting definition. First, to the extent that opinions of morality differ in significant ways, there would be an unacceptable degree of disagreement concerning whether or not a given act is a terrorist act. Another problem is that law and morality can diverge. So, there is a potential conflict

---

16 Ibid.

17 Boaz Ganor, “Defining Terrorism: Is One Man’s Terrorist Another Man’s Freedom Fighter?” *Police Practice and Research*, vol. 3, no. 4, 2002, pp. 287-304; 287.

18 Ibid.

19 Ganor, op. cit.



between the specification of terrorism as criminal and as immoral.<sup>20</sup>

The solution to this problem is to give up the idea that terrorist acts are always and everywhere immoral and unjustified. For example, John Brown led the raid on Harpers Ferry in 1859 in protest of the institution of slavery. Many people were killed, including members of American armed forces. This act counts as terrorism by any reasonable definition. It was violence carried out (partially) against non-belligerents in the service of advancing a political goal. Yet the raid was surely morally justified, inasmuch as it was carried out to oppose a much greater moral evil. Once we give up the idea that terrorism is automatically morally wrong, the problem of definition goes away.

It can be objected that viewing terrorism as potentially morally justified does not allow us to make sense of the war on terror.<sup>21</sup> It would be absurd to declare war on a practice that may or may not be morally wrong. However, this is just a terminological issue. The global war on terror can be viewed as a war on morally unjustified forms of terrorism. Moreover, the terminological issue was always present in traditional discussions of terrorism. It only took a different form. Instead of disagreement over whether a given act of terrorism was morally justified there was disagreement over whether a given act of violence was in fact a form of terrorism.

In any case, the new understanding of the nature of terrorism, according to which terrorism may or may not be morally justified, leads us to the heart of the issue concerning how to deal with Islamic extremism—the issue of what motivates Islamic terrorists.

### ***Understanding the Causes of Islamic Terrorism***

After 9/11 the Bush administration explained to the American people that the hijackers did what they did because they “hate our freedom.” This suggestion is of doubtful coherence. No one hates freedom. Everyone, certainly including members of Al Qaeda, value the freedom to do as they wish. They value the freedom, for example, to worship in their faith as they believe is most proper. On one occasion, Bush stated that “America was targeted for attack because we’re the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world. And no one will keep that light from shining.”<sup>22</sup> Whether or not the U.S. is a shining beacon, as Bush claimed, there are many countries in the world with comparable freedom and more opportunity. The administration’s line does not explain why only the U.S., out of these countries, was targeted.

Moreover, the explanation does not allow us to make any sense of the fact that only a tiny percentage of Muslims participate in any way in terrorist

---

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Martin Harrow, “The Effect of the Iraq War on Islamist Terrorism in the West.” *Cooperation and Conflict*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2010, pp. 274-293.

activities.<sup>23</sup> If the hijackers were motivated by hatred of freedom, then this was a hatred that derived from their religious beliefs. But all Muslims share a core of religious beliefs. That is what makes them Muslims. The administration's explanation leaves us without an explanation for why only a small percentage of Muslims are terrorists. For if it is a religiously motivated hatred of freedom that motivated the 9/11 hijackers, then it makes no sense that the vast majority of the world's Muslims do not hate our freedoms. To be sure, the administration was at pains to point out that the war on terror was not a war on Islam. But it had no resources to explain why this is, since it pointed to a religious motivation.<sup>24</sup>

The administration's line on the motivation of the terrorists did fulfill a crucial function: It discouraged people from thinking about the actual motivations of the terrorists.<sup>25</sup> U.S. foreign policy has never even approximated being democratically controlled. American leaders and other elites prefer that the American people remain unaware of the nation's foreign policy escapades. This is mostly because the foreign policy very often uses trillions of dollars in taxpayer funds to do things that only benefit the wealthy.<sup>26</sup>

Keeping the American people ignorant of these matters was another function of the official administration line concerning the motivations of Islamic radicals. As noted earlier, bin Laden published an open "Letter to America" in 2002.<sup>27</sup> It clearly explains why Al Qaeda targeted the U.S. Not only was this letter not published in the U.S., but there was virtually no discussion of it at all in the mainstream press. This is odd. One would have thought that the American people would be very interested to learn what motivated the 9/11 hijackers and those who made their attack possible. The explanation for this, of course, is that the letter clearly refutes the Bush administration's insistence that the terrorists did what they did because they hate our freedom. It also showed that the real motivation for the attack was U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East.<sup>28</sup>

A couple of more-or-less mainstream publications manifest some awareness of this fact. An expert on the Middle East explains that "Islamic extremism was stirred by the Iranian Revolution, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the assassination of the Egyptian president. That extremism turned anti-American because of U.S. support for Israel and repressive and

---

23 Ibid.

24 Martin Harrow, "The Effect of the Iraq War on Islamist Terrorism in the West." *Cooperation and Conflict*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2010, pp. 274-293.

25 Bruce Riedel, "9/11 and Iraq: The Making of a Tragedy." *Brookings*, 17 September 2021. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/09/17/9-11-and-iraq-the-making-of-a-tragedy/>

26 Ibid.

27 Osama bin Laden, "Letter to America." *The Guardian*, 24 November 2002.

28 Ibid.

secular Arab regimes”.<sup>29</sup> These points seem correct. But two things are unexplained by the author. First, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan led to a proxy war being fought there during the Cold War. The U.S. participated directly in this war. The fact that the U.S. opposed the Soviets and the Soviet invasion does not mean that American activity in the region was welcomed by the Afghan people or Arabs more generally. Second, the Iranian Revolution was a direct response to the fact that the U.S., in 1953, installed a repressive leader in Tehran.<sup>30</sup>

The so-called “Carter Doctrine” is also directly relevant to the motivations of the 9/11 hijackers. President Carter made the following public statement in 1980:

“Let our position be absolutely clear: An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.”<sup>31</sup>

This statement is indicative of the attitude and approach in the Middle East that has led to widespread anti-Amer-

ican sentiment. The U.S. is itself an “outside force” in the region. Carter does not explain why the U.S. should, uniquely among outside forces, be allowed to dictate what goes in the Middle East. But the statement certainly does correspond to the historical realities of American activities in the region.<sup>32</sup>

As noted, bin Laden’s “Letter to America” explains in detail the reasons for the 9/11 attack on the U.S. Half of the explanation details religious reasons for the attacks. These will be ignored here for two reasons. One is that they are not of any interest unless one happens to be a Muslim. The other is that it is plainly false that Islam itself dictates that a *jihad* must be waged against the U.S. in particular and the West in general. The vast majority of the world’s Muslims do not believe that terrorist activities ought to be undertaken. The second half of bin Laden’s letter, however, is directly relevant to the topic of this section of the paper.<sup>33</sup>

bin Laden lists a number of crimes that have been committed by the U.S. against the Middle Eastern people and its Arab Muslims. First, he points to the forcible expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from their homes at the hands of Israel. The U.S. supports Israel completely, which is why bin Laden mentions Israel in

---

29 Robert Leonhard, “The Evolution of Strategy in the Global War on Terror.” <https://www.jhuapl.edu/Content/documents/Strategy.pdf>; 4.

30 Ibid.

31 Meagan Smith and Sean Zeigler, “Terrorism Before and After 9/11—A More Dangerous World?” *Research and Politics*, vol. 10, 2017, pp. 1-8; 2.

32 Ibid.

33 bin Laden, op. cit.

this connection. He writes: “The creation and continuation of Israel is one of the greatest crimes, and you are the leaders of its criminals ... there is no need to explain or prove the degree of American support for Israel”.<sup>34</sup> Second, bin Laden points to American attacks against Somalia. Third, he references American intrusion into foreign governments in the Middle East. bin Laden does not mention here the American overthrow of the democratically elected leader of Iran in 1953, though it is relevant here as well, because he has no particular love for Iran. Fourth, bin Laden notes that gratuitous economic sanctions against Iraq have led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of innocent people. Fifth, he points to the fact that the U.S. built military bases on Islamic holy land in Saudi Arabia during the Gulf War. Finally, bin Laden points to the Clinton administration’s bombing of a pharmaceutical plant in Sudan in 1998, which left hundreds of thousands of people without the medicines that they needed.<sup>35</sup>

It is no part of the argument of this paper that the 9/11 terror attacks were morally justified. However, there are two facts that must be admitted. One is that, as we have just seen, the hijackers had very specific motivations for what they did. And these motivations do not include “hating American freedom.” The other fact is that, from the perspective of bin Laden and Al Qaeda,

terrorist attacks against the U.S. are the only way to try to achieve justice for the many crimes that bin Laden lists in his letter. This is a very common theme in terrorist activity in general. Very often, terrorists are trying to achieve a goal that cannot be attained in any other way. One cannot understand terrorists, or properly respond to them, without taking cognizance of this simple fact.

### *A Way Forward*

Looking at bin Laden’s public statement concerning the rationale behind the 9/11 attacks makes one thing very clear about the approach to combating terrorism taken by the Bush administration. To invade and occupy two Middle Eastern countries, as the U.S. has done, is precisely the opposite of what the U.S. should have done, if it is serious about reducing the threat of Islamic terrorism. For to do this is just to add to the series of crimes that caused 9/11 in the first place. Several scholars have noted that these invasions are precisely what bin Laden hoped to cause. For they have galvanized anti-American sentiment in the Middle East as never before. Stanford scholar on Middle East affairs Mark Schwartz notes that “Perhaps the greatest mistake of the Bush administration [was] its utter failure to take any steps to reduce the factors that inspire terrorists to attack us”.<sup>36</sup> This report was written in 2002, before the invasion of Iraq. So, to say that the administration

---

34 Ibid., 3.

35 Ibid.

36 Stephen Reese and Seth Lewis, “Framing the War on Terror.” *Journalism*, vol. 10, no. 6, 2009, pp. 777-797; 779.

failed to take any steps to reduce the factors that have led to Islamic extremism is an understatement. The reality is that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have dramatically increased the factors that lead terrorists to attack the U.S. But Schwartz also notes that the attempts, on the part of wealthy nations like the U.S., to control oil flows is at the heart of the problem of Islamic terrorism. If the Middle East did not have enormous energy reserves, the U.S. would have no interest in it whatever. Finally, Schwartz notes that "Sadly, an integrated framework that explains the origins of terrorism in general, and terrorism against the West based on Islamic fundamentalism in particular, is still lacking".<sup>37</sup> Such a framework, or at least an outline of such a framework, is precisely what the present paper aims to provide.

Terrorism in general is frequently caused by colonialism and imperialism, or their more recent economic forms.<sup>38</sup> This is true of Islamic terrorism that targets the West. This form of terrorism would not exist were it not for crimes that wealthy Western nations have committed against Arab Muslims in the Middle East. What ought to be done to solve the problem of Islamic extremism, therefore, is to stop exploiting and killing people in the Middle East. It is obvious, as the letter from bin Laden shows, that American foreign policy in the region is the reason that Islamic radicals have targeted the U.S. More generally, the U.S. and the West should

stop behaving as if they have some right to control oil flows in the Middle East. The oil belongs to the Middle Eastern people, and they should be in control of what happens with it. Unqualified U.S. support for Israel should also come to an end. Even if we set aside the expulsion of Palestinians from their homes, Israel has been violating international law for half a century by occupying Palestinian land. The Fourth Geneva Convention prohibits the occupation of land taken from an enemy after a war has concluded. Israel maintains that it continues to occupy the land for safety and security reasons. But if this were the case Israel would hardly be building settlements on the territories. In any case, the U.S. supports Israel economically and diplomatically. Economically because it gives Israel around \$30 billion per year. This itself is against international law since Israel builds settlements using the money supplied by the U.S. Diplomatically because the U.S. vetoes, nearly every year, a United Nations Security Council denunciation of Israel for continuing to violate international law.<sup>39</sup>

The approach to dealing with Islamic terrorism suggested here is to stop doing the things that created the terrorist threat in the first place. It can be objected that this amounts to capitulating to the demands of terrorists, which violates the maxim that the U.S. does not negotiate with terrorists. There are two problems with this objection. One is that the U.S. does negotiate with

---

37 Ibid.

38 Landler, *op. cit.*

39 Ibid.

terrorists. There is no other way to deal with them, once the threat has been created.<sup>40</sup> The other problem is that the list of things that the U.S. should stop doing is already filled with crimes. It should stop doing these things quite independently of the issue of dealing with terrorism. Taking seriously the problem of defining terrorism is of great utility here. For one could argue that Islamic terrorists are themselves responding to terrorist attacks. Whether this is so depends, in ways specified above, on how one defines “terrorism.” The crucial point, however, is simply that only by ceasing from the kinds of violent actions that the U.S. has engaged in, in the Middle East, will it ever eliminate the threat of Islamic terrorism. What has actually been done, beginning with the Bush administration’s wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and subsequent administrations’ use of drone strikes in the region, is precisely the opposite of what ought to be done. This is why the threat of Islamic terrorism has not been reduced or significantly impacted.<sup>41</sup>

## **Conclusion**

**T**his paper has discussed the problem of Islamic terrorism, as typified by the 9/11 attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C. The U.S. engaged in a “war on terror” following these attacks, which included the invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq. It is now generally conceded that this war on terror has

been strikingly unsuccessful in stopping or significantly reducing the threat of Islamic extremism. This should not be an occasion for surprise, when we look at the reasons that these extremists exist in the first place. The paper argues for a new approach to dealing with Islamic terrorism. The first step is to become clear on what precisely the term “terrorism” means. There is a basic puzzle that confronts any attempt to supply an accurate and illuminating definition of terrorism. On the one hand, most people think that terrorism, of whatever sort, is morally unjustified. On the other, any definition that includes immorality in this way is likely to have the problem of including too much. This is because there is no real way to define “terrorism” in such a way that many state-sanctioned or state-executed acts of violence, including by the U.S., will not count as terrorism. There are a couple of ways of trying to deal with this problem. One is to specify that only foreign powers, or foreign agents, can possibly commit acts of terrorism. But this is wildly implausible. Acts of violence are justified, or they are not justified. The identity of the agents of such violence is irrelevant. A better way around the problem is to drop the assumption that terrorism, of its very nature, is morally unjustified. Finally, the paper has argued that the only way to stop, or significantly reduce, the threat of Islamic terrorism is to locate the causes of such acts of terror. The Bush administration’s claim that the U.S.

---

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

was targeted because the 9/11 hijackers “hate our freedom” does not make any sense. No one hates freedom. It is not even the sort of thing that can possibly be hated. The reason, however, for the administration’s line is that being honest about why the 9/11 attacks occurred would have drawn into question certain aspects of U.S. foreign policy. When we examine the actual reasons for the 9/11 attack, we see that it was a direct response to U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. The only way to undermine the threat is to remove its causes. Only by stopping the killing of innocent Middle Eastern people, supporting Israel in a completely unqualified manner, and interfering with sovereign governments and nations in the region can the U.S. eliminate the threat of Islamic radicalism. The actual American response to 9/11 did precisely the opposite of this. The invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq are precisely the

sorts of actions that created the threat of Islamic terrorism in the first place. It is incredibly naïve and dangerous to think that dropping more bombs, and killing more innocent Muslim people, is the way to handle the threat of Islamic terrorism. The final part of the paper responded to the objection that to change U.S. foreign policy in the ways suggestion amounts to capitulation to the terrorists, which conflicts with the popular idea that the U.S. does not negotiate with terrorists. The reply is that, first, it is not true that the U.S. does not negotiate with terrorists—sometimes there is no other option; and, second, many of the activities in question are already deeply immoral, as in the case of American economic sanctions on Iraq that have killed hundreds of thousands of innocent people. There is good reason to discontinue such activities, irrespective of their role in creating the threat of Islamic terrorism.

## **Bibliography**

bin Laden, Osama. “Letter to America.” *The Guardian*, 24 November 2002.

Dascalu, Diana and Benedict Wilkinson. “Defining ‘Terrorism’ is the First Step to Defeating it.” *The Rand Corporation*, 8 November 2021. <https://www.rand.org/blog/2021/11/defining-terrorism-is-the-first-step-to-defeating-it.html>

Ganor, Boaz. “Defining Terrorism: Is One Man’s Terrorist Another Man’s Freedom Fighter?” *Police Practice and Research*, vol. 3, no. 4, 2002, pp. 287-304.

Gilpin, Robert. “War is too Important to be Left to Ideological Amateurs.” *International Relations*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2005, pp. 5-18.

Graff, Garrett. "After 9/11, the U.S. got Almost Everything Wrong." *The Atlantic*, 8 September 2021.

Green, Alan. "Defining Terrorism: One Size Fits All?" *International and Comparative Law*, vol. 2, 2017, pp. 441-440.

Harrow, Martin. "The Effect of the Iraq War on Islamist Terrorism in the West." *Cooperation and Conflict*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2010, pp. 274-293.

Landler, Mark. "20 Years on, the War on Terror Grinds Along, with No End in Sight." *The New York Times*, 10 September 2021.

Leonhard, Robert. "The Evolution of Strategy in the Global War on Terror." <https://www.jhuapl.edu/Content/documents/Strategy.pdf>

Reese, Stephen and Seth Lewis. "Framing the War on Terror." *Journalism*, vol. 10, no. 6, 2009, pp. 777-797.

Riedel, Bruce. "9/11 and Iraq: The Making of a Tragedy." *Brookings*, 17 September 2021. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/09/17/9-11-and-iraq-the-making-of-a-tragedy/>

"Signals Intelligence Activities." *DNI.gov*, 2018. <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ppd-28/CIA.pdf>

Smith, Meagan and Sean Zeigler. "Terrorism Before and After 9/11—A More Dangerous World?" *Research and Politics*, vol. 10, 2017, pp. 1-8.

"What is Intelligence?" *Office of the Director of National Intelligence*, 2018. <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/what-we-do/what-is-intelligence>