The History of the War on Terror

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U.S. Navy Seabees participate in a live-fire range exercise prior to deploying to Iraq in support of the global war on terror.
Photo by: James Finnigan

On September 11, 2001, the terrorist group al-Qaida attacked the World Trade Center in New York City. After the attack, America led a global campaign called the war on terror, or war on terrorism. The war on terror was meant to stop terrorist groups across the world.

The war on terror stretched across the globe and involved many countries. In this way, the war on terror was similar to the Cold War. It has had important consequences for security, human rights, international law, cooperation and governance. Its reach was limitless and involved the military, intelligence-gathering or spying, and new diplomatic relationships between countries.
Military operations in the Middle East

The U.S. led major military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, two countries in the Middle East. There were also secret operations in Yemen and elsewhere. The U.S. increased its military spending and began assisting regimes or rulers who worked with the country.

America reorganized and increased funding for intelligence-gathering organizations. The United States began capturing terrorist suspects and keeping them at Guantánamo Bay, a prison in Cuba. They worked more with foreign intelligence agencies to track and stop financing for terrorist agencies.

The United States also worked to maintain groups of partner states and organizations throughout the world. They also worked to limit anti-Americanism, or feelings against America as a country and culture, in the Middle East. On U.S. soil, the war on terrorism meant new antiterrorism legislation, such as the USA Patriot Act. Under the Patriot Act, certain people in the country were watched more closely. The government also put together new security institutions, such as the Department of Homeland Security, which detained suspects trying to enter the country. The National Security Agency, or NSA, began to monitor and gather more
information about people. They joined their efforts with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, or FBI, and local authorities. Security measures for airports, borders and public events were also increased.

**Early success in the war on terror**

The first years of the war on terrorism did see some success. Hundreds of terrorist suspects around the world were arrested and there were no other large-scale terrorist attacks on the American mainland. The Taliban rulers in Afghanistan, a fundamentalist Islamic group, were removed from power. Terrorist training camps in Afghanistan were closed and many of al-Qaida’s senior members were caught.

However, critics argued that the failures of America’s counterterrorism campaign outweighed its successes. They argued that the war in Afghanistan had scattered the al-Qaida network. This made the group even harder to fight against. American attacks in Afghanistan and Iraq have also increased anti-Americanism among the world’s Muslims, creating more terrorists. Other critics said that the war on terrorism was just a cover for the U.S. to try to control global oil reserves in the Middle East.

**Drawbacks and criticism**
By the time of U.S. President George W. Bush’s re-election in 2004, the drawbacks of the war on terrorism were becoming clear. In Iraq, U.S. forces had overthrown the government of Saddam Hussein in 2003. Yet, the U.S. had underestimated the difficulties of building a government from scratch. By late 2004, it was clear that Iraq was sinking into chaos and civil war. Between 2004-2007, many Iraqi civilians were killed in the violence.

Afghanistan, which for several years had seemed to be under control, soon became unstable as well. By 2006 the U.S. was facing a full-blown revolt in the country, led by a reformed Taliban.

The Bush administration faced domestic and international criticism for its actions. Critics called out most of the methods used in combating terrorism as immoral or illegal. People were kept in prison without trial. At these prisons, torture was used on detainees in an effort to get information. For the first time, combat drones, or unmanned aircraft, were used to kill suspected enemies in countries far beyond the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan.

**Obama made changes, but kept some of Bush’s policies**

By the last years of Bush’s presidency, public opinion had turned against his handling of the Iraq War and other national security matters. This anger helped Barack Obama, an outspoken critic of Bush’s foreign policy, win the presidency in 2008. Under the new administration, the expression “war on terrorism” quickly disappeared from official communications. Obama made his disapproval clear in a 2013 speech. He stated that the United States would no longer engage in a boundless, vaguely defined “global war on terrorism.” Instead, the country would take more focused action against specific hostile groups. Under Obama, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were gradually wound down. However, at the end of Obama’s presidency in 2016, there were still U.S. troops in both countries.

While Obama did reject the war on terrorism in his speeches and as a framework for national security, he continued several of Bush’s policies. The Obama administration greatly expanded the campaign of targeted killings carried out by drones. Attacks were even authorized on several U.S. citizens abroad who were deemed threatening. Special operations forces were greatly expanded. They were used more and more to conduct low-profile military missions in countries outside of acknowledged war zones. The U.S. security agencies also continued the wide-scale monitoring they had begun during the Bush administration despite protests from civil liberties groups.