International Centre for Counter-Terrorism

25 Years After 9/11 Terrorism Remains a Priority

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Twenty-five years ago, on 11 September 2001, al-Qaeda perpetrated the most deadly terrorist attacks in history. Nearly 3,000 individuals were killed. Beyond the immediate tragedy, however, 9/11 marked the beginning of new international era in which the fight against terrorism defined international security and the global foreign policy agenda. It was the Global War On Terror (GWOT). Although the "war" is officially over, a number of ongoing counter-terrorism campaigns throughout the world remind us that the threat has not disappeared. Yet, in a changing political and security landscape, most governments are now keen to deprioritise counter-terrorism. This could be a dangerous mistake.

In spite of some achievements, the Global War On Terror was far from being a success. Arguably, the excesses of the past 25 years largely overshadowed all potential successes. Financially, the United States alone spent more than eight trillion dollars on the GWOT. The human cost was massive as well. Almost one million persons died as a direct consequence, and an estimated 38 million people were displaced. Furthermore, GWOT justified a significant erosion of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including in Western societies. Famous examples include the use of torture, arbitrary detention, mass surveillance, or the banalisation of exceptional measures.

Mission unfinished

Twenty five years after 9/11, it is hard to claim victory. In Afghanistan, the Taliban are back in power, and they are again offering a safe space for terrorist organisations – not only al-Qaeda, but also the Islamic State. In Syria, the caliphate has been defeated, but the country is governed by a former jihadist leader, and terrorist groups remain quite powerful. On the African continent, now considered as the new epicentre of global terrorism, jihadi groups are growing in size and capacity, and in some cases have taken control of large territories – notably in the Sahel.

Overall, there are more terrorist groups and militants today than 25 years ago, and the threat levels in most European countries remain elevated. In short, in spite of some tactical successes, the GWOT has been a strategic failure.

There are lessons to be learned in every failure, and the GWOT makes no exception. First, ideology cannot be defeated by missiles, or brute force. Countering terrorism is a battle of ideas, or for the "hearts and minds" as the US military doctrine once stated. It is about offering a better model of society, a vision in which individuals believe they can thrive and belong. This "vision" remains missing in many countries.

Second, whereas coercive force is needed to address the tip of the spear of terrorism, through military or judiciary power, soft power is equally if not more important. Prevention policies have a demonstrated effect on addressing the conducive environment to radicalisation and terrorist recruitment. Instead of taking down terrorists, prevention policies aim at emptying the reservoir of potential recruits.

Third, counter-terrorism is a collective effort. Domestically, this means developing partnerships from the municipal level to the national level, between all parts of government, but also with civil society. Everyone has a role to play. International cooperation is necessary as well.

Terrorism doesn't stop at the borders, particularly in the digital age. States must cooperate to prevent terrorism from spreading, both online and offline.

We can't afford counter-terrorism fatigue

After 9/11, the key mistake was to overreact. All the excesses of the GWOT proved not only ineffective, but counter-productive. Today, however, it is exactly the opposite risk that is looming ahead: under-reaction.

There is no global consensus on the importance of counter-terrorism anymore, and there is a clear disinvestment in counter-terrorism efforts, notably in the US but also in Europe, including in the Netherlands. There is, in particular, less funding available for research, prevention, and international cooperation.

It is true that there are many other security issues calling for attention, and budgets are limited. But neglecting terrorism is a risky bargain. If 9/11 has taught us one thing, it is that you can ignore terrorism, but terrorists will not ignore you. This counter-terrorism fatigue occurred already 15 years ago. As a result, European countries were caught unprepared to respond to the massive mobilisation for the jihad in Syria and Iraq. We should make sure not to repeat the same mistake again.

https://icct.nl/publication/25-years-after-911-terrorism-remains-priority

This article was first published in Dutch, by the newspaper De Morgen, under the title "Kwarteeuw na 9/11 blijft terrorisme een prioriteit".

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