

The 9/11 Attacks, 20 Years On: An FBI Terrorism Analyst Reflects on an Unwinnable War

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Articles & Testimony

As Washington recalibrates its costly strategy against violent extremists, its goal should be to reduce terrorism to a low-level threat that law enforcement can handle.

At the time of the 9/11 attacks, I was a senior counterterrorism analyst at FBI headquarters in Washington, D.C., focused on terrorism in and from the Middle East. Al Qaeda-affiliated threats had been picking up their pace since the turn of the millennium. By the spring and summer of 2001, the [system was blinking red \(https://9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf\)](https://9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf) as intelligence agencies gathered chatter of an impending plot—but failed to develop actionable information to counter the threat.

Ironically, I was out of the office on that fateful morning, having cleared my schedule months in advance to take a day off to work on my dissertation. I helped my wife and kids get out the door and settled in at my computer just in time to see a news ticker cross my screen reporting that a small propeller plane had crashed into the north tower of the World Trade Center. I turned on the television and watched United Airlines Flight 175 crash into the south tower. Within hours, I would be sitting in the FBI Strategic Information and Operations Center, assigned to lead the analytical team focused on UA175.

I remember well feeling that primeval “fight or flight” response to danger. People were glued to the televisions watching the planes crash into the towers over and over on cable news, and I felt grateful to be part of the FBI’s response. Unlike most, there was something I could actually do. My colleagues and I worked 15-hour days and six-day weeks in our attempt to not only determine who carried out the attacks, but to uncover and prevent the follow-on attacks we feared were coming. Intelligence, information from the public and investigative leads were coming in like

a tidal wave, and making sense of it all in a timely manner was a gargantuan task.

But as days and weeks morphed into months and years, what we did to counter terrorism did not significantly evolve. It was understandable that immediately following 9/11, the entire U.S. national security bureaucracy—and, indeed, country—was focused solely on bringing the perpetrators to justice and preventing the next attack. But after that, we needed to adapt—and we didn't.

U.S. officials from President George W. Bush on down immediately framed our counterterrorism efforts as a **war to be won** (https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushaddress_092001.html). Fittingly so, as Americans needed to hear that everything would be OK, that the terrorists would be found and punished, while the government bureaucracy needed to be galvanized to secure the country at warp speed.

Over the following two decades, the United States built a counterterrorism enterprise through its intelligence, law enforcement and military bodies that has been remarkably successful from a tactical perspective—**foiling attacks** (<https://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/list-terror-attacks-foiled-plots-nyc-article-1.3692532>) and **disrupting terrorist networks** (<https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg632.aspx>). But it has been less successful from a strategic vantage point, given that more people today are radicalized to violent extremism than in 2001 as part of a more diversified and globally dispersed terrorist threat. Two decades after 9/11, the U.S. government's database of known or suspected terrorists **has grown by a factor of nearly 20** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/counterterrorism-era-competing-priorities-ten-key-considerations>).

The fact is, the struggle against terrorism is not a war to be won or lost. The United States has never actually fought a “war on terrorism” any more than it has fought a war on crime or drugs. Counterterrorism efforts, therefore, cannot be measured in terms of victory or defeat. Rather, they should be seen as part of an ongoing effort—short of both war and peace—to disrupt acts of terrorism, compete with adversaries and address the underlying issues that make a dangerous minority of people believe the only way to achieve their social or political goals is through violence targeting civilians.

By focusing so many resources on the counterterrorism mission for two decades, all those dollars, intelligence assets and more primarily went to support military actions. It's long overdue for the mission to recalibrate by widening the national security aperture to address other key threats, from cybersecurity to climate change, and trimming the counterterrorism program to make it more affordable over the long term.

This will require less investment in expensive hard power (military) and much more investment in inexpensive soft power (intelligence, diplomacy, civilian capacity-building). It's a shift that will entail a period of rebalancing, along with burden shifting to partners and allies.

The United States should draw on its civilian departments and agencies to help foreign countries address radicalization themselves, arresting and trying terrorism suspects within the rule of law and with respect for human rights, and working with private and nongovernmental partners to build resilient communities. We must invest in our partners' own civilian departments and agencies, such as ministries of justice, interior and corrections.

At the same time, these policy changes must seek to preserve the many counterterrorism advances already made. For instance, the U.S. should consider maintaining small numbers of troops in key locations to defuse global challenges, albeit not with the intention of resolving them. Small counterterrorism missions in Iraq, Syria, Africa and, yes, Afghanistan may be necessary to prevent terrorist groups from holding territory or plotting foreign attacks from safe havens. Such deployments could be run by international partners rather than the U.S., such as the **French-led Operation Barkhane** (<https://www.france24.com/en/france/20210216-france-will-step-up-anti->

terror-efforts-in-the-sahel-says-macron in Africa's Sahel region or the **mission in Iraq** (<https://www.cnbc.com/2021/02/18/nato-expands-mission-in-iraq-on-the-heels-of-deadly-rocket-attack.html>) where NATO's deployment is increasing.

Like efforts to counter crime, drugs, corruption or other illicit activities, countering terrorism is an ongoing effort. While none of these malign activities can be defeated, persistent efforts to counter them can be very effective. Twenty years ago, in the heat of the moment, the U.S. counterterrorism response was entirely tactical, aimed at preventing the next attack. Politics, ongoing threats and bureaucratic inertia then prevented any serious re-evaluation of that strategy. Today, we need to focus on not only stopping today's plots, but also on shrinking the pool of people drawn to violent extremist ideologies.

Unlike traditional wars, there is no end game or exit strategy for the struggle against terrorism. Leaders should communicate to the public that terrorism is a tactic, and its complete defeat is neither achievable nor necessary. They should avoid language suggesting terrorism will end or be defeated and speak about terrorism instead as a danger to be taken seriously but one that does not present an existential threat to the country. The goal should be to reduce terrorism to a low-level threat that law enforcement can address, just as it ably does other threats.

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow at The Washington Institute, director of its Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, and author of its 2021 paper 'Rethinking U.S. Efforts on Counterterrorism: Toward a Sustainable Plan Two Decades After 9/11' (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/rethinking-us-efforts-counterterrorism-toward-sustainable-plan-two-decades-after>). This article was originally published on the NBC News website (<https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/9-11-attacks-20-years-fbi-terrorism-analyst-reflects-unwinnable-ncna1278942>). ❖

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