

9/11 Led to an Explosion of Counterterrorism Expertise. Are We Squandering It?

by [Aaron Y. Zelin \(/experts/aaron-y-zelin\)](/experts/aaron-y-zelin)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Aaron Y. Zelin \(/experts/aaron-y-zelin\)](/experts/aaron-y-zelin)

Aaron Y. Zelin is the Gloria and Ken Levy Senior Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, where his research focuses on Sunni Arab jihadist groups in North Africa and Syria, foreign fighting, and online jihadism.



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America's institutional knowledge about global jihadist terrorism took decades to accumulate, but it could disappear much faster.

The most underrated consequence of 9/11 may be the creation of an extraordinary American counterterrorism knowledge base—and the danger posed by its gradual disappearance. Before September 11, the U.S. government possessed pockets of expertise on al-Qaeda and jihadist movements, but they were poorly integrated and rarely prioritized. The attacks transformed that situation. Over the next quarter-century, Washington built an ecosystem of intelligence officers, diplomats, military personnel, law-enforcement officials, Treasury specialists, academics, and analysts who learned how jihadist organizations recruit, finance themselves, govern territory, communicate, and plan attacks. Agencies developed mechanisms for sharing intelligence that barely existed before 9/11. The United States also accumulated hard-earned knowledge from its successes and failures in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere.

That institutional knowledge was a major reason there was never another attack on the scale of 9/11 in the United States. It helped Washington disrupt terrorist networks, identify emerging organizations, and understand how local insurgencies could evolve into transnational threats.

There is a useful historical warning here. After the Cold War, the United States allowed much of its Soviet-focused expertise to atrophy as Russia receded from the top tier of national security priorities. Yet the problem did not disappear. By the mid-to-late 2000s, signs of renewed Russian aggression were increasingly visible, ultimately leading to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The lesson is not that former Sovietologists could have prevented these events. It is that rebuilding deep expertise after a threat returns is far harder than preserving it.

Counterterrorism risks are following a similar trajectory. As Washington shifts toward China, Russia, and interstate competition, specialized units have shrunk or redirected their focus, while officials shaped by 9/11 and the wars that followed are retiring. Younger officials are entering government when jihadism appears peripheral.

The danger is not that al-Qaeda or the Islamic State will simply recreate September 11. The threat has evolved. The greater risk is that a future terrorist resurgence will confront a government with fewer people who understand how these movements developed, why earlier assessments failed, which policies worked, and which mistakes proved costly.

One overlooked legacy of 9/11, therefore, is the institutional knowledge America built afterward. It took twenty-five years to accumulate and could disappear much faster.

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