

U.S. COUNTERTERRORISM POLICY

In the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States launched an international war on terrorism defined by military intervention, nation building, and efforts to reshape the politics of the Middle East. Unfortunately, that strategy has not delivered the intended results. It's time to turn the page in the War on Terror and adopt policies that better reflect the serious but limited threat that terrorism poses to the United States.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Scale back counterterrorism objectives.** Policymakers should end direct military intervention and nation-building operations, implement policies to manage the threat of terrorism, and focus on the defense of the homeland.
- **Support regional partners to take the lead in confronting terrorism.** Support regional partners to combat terrorism through the United Nations or other multilateral institutions (when possible) to defuse the "West versus Islam" narrative.
- **Emphasize the intelligence and law enforcement paradigm to combat terrorism.** Focus on assessing emerging threats and interrupting them in the planning cycle through intelligence and police work, not military intervention.

BACKGROUND

The 9/11 terrorist attacks were devastating, and given America's lack of experience with such events, fear, confusion, and overreaction were understandable responses in the short run. In reality, the terrorist threat to the United States is much smaller than originally imagined. Rather than correct the initial threat assessment, political leaders from both parties have continued to portray terrorism as a very large, even existential, threat to the United States. This inflated view of the terrorist threat led directly to the excessive size, scope, and ambition of the War on Terror.

Yet while the United States has not suffered another major terrorist attack, there is no proof that intervention abroad had anything to do with that. Nor has the War on Terror made Americans appreciably safer (nor made them feel safer) than they were before 9/11, in part because Americans were already exceptionally safe and in part because offensive counterterrorism efforts have had little or no connection to the rate of terrorism in the U.S. homeland.

In contrast, counterterrorism efforts focused on the homeland have a successful track record. And despite existing gaps and inefficiencies, there have been very few successful terrorist attacks in the United States since 2001. Even fewer of those attacks have caused casualties and, in all cases, the perpetrators have been killed or arrested. Homeland security can never promise perfect security, and acknowledging this is difficult, especially politically, but the aggressive military strategies that falsely promised zero risk have failed.

By adopting a more modest goal of managing the terror risk, the United States can reduce the likelihood of future attacks through continued security efforts that rely on law enforcement and intelligence agencies. By embracing a less militaristic and less interventionist approach, the United States can avoid repeating the dangerous and very costly mistakes of the past 18 years.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[“Step Back: Lessons for U.S. Foreign Policy from the Failed War on Terror”](#) by Trevor Thrall and Erik Goepner, Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 814, June 26, 2017.

[*Chasing Ghosts: The Policing of Terrorism*](#) by John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[“Responsible Counterterrorism Policy”](#) by John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 755, September 10, 2014.

[*Terrorizing Ourselves: Why U.S. Counterterrorism Policy Is Failing and How to Fix It*](#), eds. Benjamin H. Friedman, Jim Harper, and Christopher A. Preble (Washington: Cato Institute, 2010).