

The Failures of U.S. National Security Since the 9/11 Attacks

Leila Zelman

April 7, 2025

American Studies

Mr. Deitelbaum

On September 11, 2001, at 8:46 a.m., a hijacked passenger plane flew into the North Tower of the World Trade Center, shocking the world. Eighteen minutes later, another plane flew into the South Tower, and 56 minutes after that, it collapsed. At 9:37 a.m., a plane flew into the Pentagon, and at 10:02 a.m., a flight crashed into an empty field in Pennsylvania after the passengers overtook the hijackers. That plane was headed for the U.S. Capitol building. On that day, attacks orchestrated by the Islamic Jihadist group al-Qaeda killed 2,977 people and forever changed the American people's idea of being safe in their own country. Before 9/11, the only other foreign attack on mainland United States soil was a bombing in the underground parking garage of the World Trade Center eight years prior. The new reality was that Americans were not safe, leading to major changes to U.S. foreign policy, terrorism initiatives, and the creation of new departments within the U.S. government. Before 9/11, U.S. anti-terrorism policy was influenced primarily by the Cold War, leading to a defensive policy through the 1970s-1990s. The defense strategy goal during this time was to reduce vulnerabilities on U.S. soil. With 9/11 and the 21st century, it became clear that this had to change. The government responded, changing its strategy to an offensive, counter-terrorism one. This was meant to be a positive change leading to global growth and development in the security field, but it turned out to be controversial in many ways. One of the first things the government did was change policy to a more military-centric approach, but that came with human, financial, and strategic opportunity costs. With controversial military action in the Middle East, immigration policies becoming increasingly limiting, and partisan divide becoming more and more hostile, most of the security

gains in the past 20 years came with such moral, financial, and military losses that, in the long run, the losses outweigh the gains.

After the harrowing attacks in New York City, the U.S. government changed its objectives to focus on a counter-terrorism effort as opposed to the intelligence-based anti-terrorism (anti-communism) focus previously used. Counter terrorism uses “proactive and reactive efforts to prevent, deter, and respond to terrorist activities and threats, ensuring the security and safety of the U.S. and its citizens.”¹ A counterterrorism approach is one more focused on diplomacy, international cooperation, law enforcement cooperation, extradition, covert action, and military action.² It takes more offensive measures in preventing terrorism, and when put into place in government policies, it changed domestic and foreign policy to limit terrorist cells in and outside of U.S. land. This new initiative was meant to change the outdated policies that mainly focused on ensuring that Russia would not drop a nuclear bomb on the U.S. during the Cold War. The new counter-terrorism policy was defensive and aimed to stop terrorists from even finalizing their plans before coming into the U.S., rather than stopping them (if they could), after they were already here. One of the first changes made was the creation of the Office of Homeland Security (“OHS”). President Bush created the OHS by executive order one month after 9/11, which eventually evolved into the Department of Homeland Security (“DHS”). DHS addresses aviation/border security, maritime security, cybersecurity, and emergency response systems both domestic and abroad.³ Another branch added to the government was the National Security Division (“NSD”) of the Department of Justice. These new agencies have been involved in countless counter-terrorism initiatives since 9/11, some successful, and others not. DHS has

¹ Guler, Ahmet, and Mustafa Demir. “How Effective Are the Post-9/11 U.S. Counterterrorism ...” Sage Journals. Accessed February 27, 2025. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/08874034241271175>.

² Guler, Ahmet, and Mustafa Demir. “How Effective Are the Post-9/11 U.S. Counterterrorism ...” Sage Journals. Accessed February 27, 2025. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/08874034241271175>.

³ Guler, Ahmet, and Mustafa Demir. “How Effective Are the Post-9/11 U.S. Counterterrorism ...” Sage Journals. Accessed February 27, 2025. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/08874034241271175>.

increased airport security worldwide, which has been extremely valuable in stopping terrorism, drug trade, etc. Some more controversial initiatives include increased border security and immigration protocol, which in most cases has resulted in it taking immigrants years to gain citizenship or asylum, in turn increasing their chances of deportation. Although the goal in increasing immigration security was to stop terrorists from entering the country, the effect has caused innocent families more terror and pain while they were trying to escape from the horrors back home. From the DHS, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (“ICE”) was formed in 2003. ICE is known for being harsh and controversial. Similarly, U.S. military action post 9/11 has been extremely controversial, especially when in 2021 the U.S. quickly pulled out of Afghanistan, essentially giving the terrorists that they were trying to eradicate all the military equipment they left behind. Now, people in Afghanistan fear the Taliban even more because they have U.S. military equipment, and this has just caused increased turmoil. Overall, these new counter terrorism agencies and policies have proven to be more hurtful than they were designed to be.

The 9/11 attacks that killed 2,977 people also changed the objectives and purpose of U.S. national security. The response was meant to be immediate and detrimental to the enemy, so the government put into place new military operations focused on targets in the Middle East. One week after the attacks, a Congressional resolution authorized the use of military force against adversaries who orchestrated the attacks. On October 7, 2001, Operation Enduring Freedom was put into effect.⁴ This was a U.S.-led international military response with the aim of destroying al-Qaeda. This put into play simultaneous military action in Afghanistan, and against the Islamic

⁴ Hananel, Sam, Senior Director, Doug Molof, Director, Doug Molof, Director, Sara Estep, Nicole Alvarez, Greta Bedekovics, The Early Childhood Policy Team, and Mark Haggerty. “The Lessons Learned for U.S. National Security Policy in the 20 Years since 9/11.” Center for American Progress, May 26, 2022. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/lessons-learned-u-s-national-security-policy-20-years-since-911/>

State group in Syria and Iraq. This was known as the “War on Terror”. The U.S. first invaded Afghanistan to try to eradicate a terrorist group, the Taliban, which mainly controlled Afghanistan and was hiding al-Qaeda. Countless intelligence operations were run with the goal of finding Osama Bin Laden, the leader of al-Qaeda. The war in Afghanistan waged on, and the hunt for Osama Bin Laden grew to many other countries until he was found and killed almost a decade after 9/11 in Abbottabad, Pakistan, on May 2, 2011.⁵ The withdrawal from Afghanistan started after Osama Bin Laden was killed, but it caused controversy because the U.S. government took a decade to fully pull out. During their time in Afghanistan, the U.S. government tried to establish a stable government in Kabul, but it failed, and after the withdrawal, the Islamic State Khorasan Province (“ISIS-K”) and the Taliban took over the country once again. The final removal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan took a rapid turn because of a deal struck by the U.S. and the Taliban in February 2020, and because of this, U.S. troops had to be out of Afghanistan by September 2021. Many oversights happened during the rapid withdrawal, which caused many Americans and Afghans to lose their lives. In turn, it also enabled the Taliban and ISIS-K to retake Kabul with advanced military equipment left there by the U.S. Now, these terrorist organizations have retaken Afghanistan and are terrorizing their own people. Oppression, violence, economic hardships, tense environments, and severe human and women's rights crisis have made Afghanistan a tense place to live since the withdrawal of U.S. troops.

After the invasion of Afghanistan, Iraq, where Saddam Hussein was in power, was then invaded in 2003 when an informant advised U.S. intelligence that Iraq had “weapons of mass destruction” and was harboring terrorists. It is now widely believed that the informant was

⁵ Guler, Ahmet, and Mustafa Demir. “How Effectivecrises Are the Post-9/11 U.S. Counterterrorism ...” Sage Journals. Accessed February 27, 2025.
hSaddamSaddam<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/08874034241271175>.

wrong, which resulted in major backlash on the U.S. for invading a possibly innocent country. Additionally, while the military took out Saddam Hussein's government, a major terrorist group, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria ("ISIS"), took over in its place. The U.S. both indirectly and directly caused Iraq to fall to terrorists. There were major life costs and oppression from ISIS on innocent civilians. There should have been repercussions, but the focus instead was on killing Osama Bin Laden, and the issues in Iraq were overshadowed. Additionally, the military-centric approach adopted after 9/11 increased resources going towards the war, while diverting resources to other things just as important. The financial downfall of the war was also detrimental, and an estimated \$5.1 billion in debt has been amassed since 9/11, just on war-related costs.⁶ Another major act put into place during the aftermath of 9/11 was the Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act ("USA PATRIOT Act").⁷ This new law was meant to "deter and prosecute terrorists, strengthen law enforcement efforts against terrorism, and increase the capability of law enforcement in counterterrorism investigations."⁸ It was challenged by civil liberties activists who claimed that the act was unconstitutional because of potential abuse by federal employees, although this was never confirmed any such abuses happened.

Since the 9/11 attacks, not only have there been changes in counter-terrorism policy but domestic national security as well, requiring changes to immigration policies. The 9/11 terrorists were foreign nationals in the U.S. on non-immigrant visas, which is why immigration control became important. These new changes have birthed a highly securitized immigration process

⁶ Pilnick, Katherine. "War Debt: What It Costs for American to Go to War." Debt.org, November 17, 2020. <https://www.debt.org/blog/war-debt-america/#:~:text=Many%20experts%20estimate%20that%20since,of%20the%20total%20national%20debt>.

⁷ Guler, Ahmet, and Mustafa Demir. "How Effective Are the Post-9/11 U.S. Counterterrorism ..." Sage Journals. Accessed February 27, 2025. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/08874034241271175>.

⁸ Guler, Ahmet, and Mustafa Demir. "How Effective Are the Post-9/11 U.S. Counterterrorism ..." Sage Journals. Accessed February 27, 2025. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/08874034241271175>.

with increased budgets, large-scale arrests, and detention and deportation at an all time high, while using increased cooperation between federal, state, and local law enforcement. In the past 20 years, the U.S. government has focused its immigration resources on the border of Mexico. Five days before the attack, on September 6th, 2001, both countries agreed on a “framework for reform” regarding immigration, but 9/11 derailed these talks. Congress’s attempts to restart these talks have failed three times, in 2006, 2007, and most recently in 2013.⁹ These setbacks have caused U.S.-Mexico relations to go downhill and have also led to new immigration reform. Although the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (“IIRIRA”), which “expanded the list of criminal convictions that made noncitizens deportable and subject to mandatory detention,”¹⁰ was passed after the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, as of 9/11, measures of this act were not in effect. After 9/11, the government began using them, causing a dramatic increase in resources going towards immigration agencies. There were also many new agencies formed that were focused on immigration. The first one was the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (“INS”), then U.S. Customs and Border Protection (“CBP”), U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (“USCIS”), and ICE, as previously mentioned. According to some people, this was the “biggest restructuring of the federal bureaucracy since World War II”.¹¹ In the long run, this major security overhaul caused some gains in protection for the U.S. people, but overall, the downsides were drastic because of the limits of these new policies.

⁹ Bolter, Jessica, and Muzaffar Chishti. “Two Decades after 9/11, National Security Focus Still Dominates U.S. Immigration System.” *migrationpolicy.org*, November 29, 2021. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/two-decades-after-sept-11-immigration-national-security>.

¹⁰ Bolter, Jessica, and Muzaffar Chishti. “Two Decades after 9/11, National Security Focus Still Dominates U.S. Immigration System.” *migrationpolicy.org*, November 29, 2021. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/two-decades-after-sept-11-immigration-national-security>.

¹¹ Hananel, Sam, Senior Director, Doug Molof, Director, Doug Molof, Director, Sara Estep, Nicole Alvarez, Greta Bedekovics, The Early Childhood Policy Team, and Mark Haggerty. “The Lessons Learned for U.S. National Security Policy in the 20 Years since 9/11.” *Center for American Progress*, May 26, 2022. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/lessons-learned-u-s-national-security-policy-20-years-since-911/>

Another post 9/11 act was the 2004 Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act, which amended the National Security Act of 1947 and was “principally aimed to restructure and bolster the U.S. intelligence community.”¹² It increased the number of available beds in the Department of Homeland Security’s detention centers along the borders by 8,000 each year from 2006-2010. From 2010 - 2012, ICE was required to maintain a capacity to hold a minimum of 33,400 people.¹³ This change overran the U.S. systems, and was all caused by an act for “intelligence reform and terrorism prevention”. The government believed that the 9/11 attacks could have been stopped if more information had been shared between different parts of the U.S. government. Additionally, the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System (“NSEERS”), which operated from 2002-2003, was a highly controversial change, which is part of the reason that it only lasted for one year. It required noncitizen males ages 16 and older from 25 countries (24 were of muslim majority) to submit biometrics when they entered the U.S. and to do periodic check-ins with immigration officials once admitted. Noncitizen immigrants who fit the criteria and were already in the country had to report to immigration officials for registration and questioning. In 2003, the questioning and check-ins ended, but the biometrics and entry points remained until 2011, which is suspiciously when Osama Bin Laden was assassinated. The primary objection to this law was that it could lead to discrimination, abuse of power, and prejudice. From these immigration protocols, there have been lasting impacts on the muslim community and other minority groups trying to immigrate into the country.

The overall mental, financial, economic, and social impacts on the U.S. people, caused by these drastic changes since 9/11 has not yet been realized. In today's politics national debt is a

¹² Bolter, Jessica, and Muzaffar Chishti. “Two Decades after 9/11, National Security Focus Still Dominates U.S. Immigration System.” migrationpolicy.org, November 29, 2021.
<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/two-decades-after-sept-11-immigration-national-security>.

¹³ Bolter, Jessica, and Muzaffar Chishti. “Two Decades after 9/11, National Security Focus Still Dominates U.S. Immigration System.” migrationpolicy.org, November 29, 2021.
<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/two-decade,,s-after-sept-11-immigration-national-security>.

big focus, but the government needs to realize that military funds and funds going towards war are a major cause of that. The War on Terror caused an estimated \$5.1 billion in national debt, and that number is only rising with the U.S.'s involvement in overseas conflicts. Another repercussion of these changes is trauma caused by the immigration system. Little children are separated from their parents at the border and they may never see their families again. Some people immigrating into the country are immediately seen as terrorists because of what they look like or their cultural affiliations. The fear caused by 9/11 is real, but the people trying to find a home in a safer place are not the ones to fear. Overall, the aftermath and continuation of the transformation in U.S. national security have not been perceived yet, but if and when it does, the realization of the failures of the United States government will be clear.

Works cited

Bolter, Jessica, and Muzaffar Chishti. "Two Decades after 9/11, National Security Focus Still Dominates U.S. Immigration System." migrationpolicy.org, November 29, 2021.
<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/two-decades-after-sept-11-immigration-national-security>.

Guler, Ahmet, and Mustafa Demir. "How Effective Are the Post-9/11 U.S. Counterterrorism ..." Sage Journals. Accessed February 27, 2025.
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/08874034241271175>.

Hananel, Sam, Senior Director, Doug Molof, Director, Doug Molof, Director, Sara Estep, Nicole Alvarez, Greta Bedekovics, The Early Childhood Policy Team, and Mark Haggerty. "The Lessons Learned for U.S. National Security Policy in the 20 Years since 9/11." Center for American Progress, May 26, 2022.
<https://www.americanprogress.org/article/lessons-learned-u-s-national-security-policy-20-years-since-911/>.

Pilnick, Katherine. "War Debt: What It Costs for Americans to Go to War." Debt.org, November 17, 2020.
<https://www.debt.org/blog/war-debt-america/#:~:text=Many%20experts%20estimate%20that%20since,of%20the%20total%20national%20debt>.