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## 2001-2015, from Al-Qaeda to Isis: A Short Review on 15 Years of Struggle against Terrorism

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**Abstract:**

*We have often heard that the 21st century will be spiritual or will not be - a sentence falsely attributed to André Malraux usually. Unfortunately, in the eyes of the world, expected spirituality was swept away by the images of the 9/11 attacks in 2001. Instead of hope for a global awareness, people got to know words such as “Terror”, “Barbarism”, and “War on Terror”, “War and Terrorism”.*

*Terrorism and security issues became major concerns. This applies for governments first; they are using terrorism as a political guideline, then on a wider global scene. Terrorism was seen hitherto as a matter of state; it became one of the main topics in international organizations. After 15 years of active counter-terrorism on a global scale, the assessment of the situation shows that the results are not very encouraging so far.*

**Keywords:** *Terrorism, assessment, counter-terrorism policy, Al-Qaeda, ISIS*

We have often heard that the 21st century will be spiritual or will not be - a sentence falsely attributed to André Malraux usually. Unfortunately, in the eyes of the world, expected spirituality was swept away by the images of the 9/11 attacks in 2001. Instead of hope for a global awareness, people got to know words such as “Terror”, “Barbarism”, and “War on Terror”, “War and Terrorism. September 11<sup>th</sup>. Year 2001: hundreds of millions of people around the world were the witnesses of the biggest terrorist attack ever. What was regarded as the symbol of the American economic power was reduced to ashes after the Twin Towers collapsed. The Pentagon, symbol of its military power was not spared either. Over 2973 people were killed that day<sup>1</sup>. Terrorists didn’t strike a small and unknown country lost in the middle-east nobody cares about. It struck the United States, the most powerful country in the world. The implications of those attacks were so huge that the 9/11 commission needed almost two years to submit a report of 585 pages. Beyond the human and material loss and the shock caused by live images transmitted on almost any television, the magnitude of the 9/11 attacks enable terrorism to enter durably in the political preoccupations of states, then on a wider international arena. Terrorism was seen hitherto as a matter of state, which had to deal with some opposition groups using terrorism as the only way to make their claims heard; it became one of the main topics in international organizations and a major concern so far on a worldwide scale. 9/11 shows that a terrorist group, with resolution, could strike anywhere, anytime. Places out of reach no longer exist.

But the most frightening thing is the degree of commitment needed to complete successfully such task: 19 terrorists involved, months of preparation, four airliners hijacked. And surprisingly, against all probabilities and statistics, the only thing went wrong in their plan was the reaction of people on board the flight UA 93. Terrorists were determined and well prepared. United States was not. No country was. The response to these attacks was as determined as the 9/11 attacks themselves. The idea was nothing less than to put an end to al-Qaeda by all means, no matter what, and at any cost. USA initiated the “war on terror”, followed by other Western nations as United Kingdom, France or Canada.

15 years after 9/11, can we say that we won the war against terrorism, or at least can we think we are close to doing so? Absolutely not. Of course Al-Qaeda was broken up and Osama bin Laden was neutralized on May 2011. But terrorism has not been defeated. It changed. The situation in Middle-east, Africa and Europa shows terrorists groups evolve, spread and are stronger than before. Just see how easily the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria was able to rise while countries around the world were engaged in a hard fight against terrorism never seen until then.

The will to fight and eradicate terrorism since 2001 allowed to develop new tools that the states could use to prevent any further attacks. The first reaction of any state facing terrorism is to adopt a series of measures to strengthen laws to fight the “enemy within”. The state need to ensure the integrity of its territory, it can be achieved reinforcing the existent civil and criminal law legislation. We saw how the United States Congress enacted the USA Patriot Act in 2001 after the 9/11. Laws must be changed to no longer be an obstacle to the fight against terrorism. And generally these laws become more restrictive over time. The Military Commission Act of

2006 and its amendment in 2009 announced a fusion between the penal law and the war law. If the Obama's administration abandoned its vocabulary the "war on terror", it accomplishes what the Bush administration had not been able to achieve. The Obama administration has dropped the term "War on terror", but accomplished what Bush could not achieve: endless detention without trial or charge of US citizens designated as enemy by the executive, as the sociologist Jean-Claude Paye points out<sup>ii</sup>. The same pattern occurs in France. The French Government declares the "state of emergency" following the attacks of November 2015, allowing the administrative authorities to take measures to restrict freedoms and remove department of justice from some of its prerogatives. But it seems that this is not enough, so in the beginning of March 2016, the French National Assembly voted a penal reform post-attacks to change laws outside the emergency state status. For example, a simple identity control can now last up to 4 hours, the time to check the status of a person<sup>iii</sup>.

Reinforcing laws is just a step. In the fight against terrorism the state needs a structure to direct, manage, analyze and act as quick as possible. Europe as a whole of different countries naturally set up such structures with time, which just need to adjust to the terrorist threat. It was much more violent for USA. The Homeland Security Act of November 2002 was a great change in American federal organization to ensure the country's internal security. Some even think that was the largest restructuring of American government since the creation of Department of Defense in 1947. Such restructuring requires time to be fully operational.

The fight against terrorism requires not only means of investigation and response, but also requires analytical tools. To combat it effectively we need to understand what terrorism is and how it works. We need to collect data and people able to interpret the data. There are various projects whose aim is to bring a scientific approach to the analysis of data on terrorism:

The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START)<sup>iv</sup> was launched in 2005 as a U.S. Department of Homeland Security Center of Excellence. START is a research center at the University of Maryland focused on the scientific study of causes and consequences of terrorism. With the collaboration of START, the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) publishes the Global Terrorism Index (GTI), ranking nations according to terrorist activity<sup>v</sup>.

The International Center for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (ICSR)<sup>vi</sup>. Founded in 2008 and headed by Dr. Peter Neumann, the ICSR is a think tank based at Kings College London. ICSR's mission is to bring together knowledge and leadership and help policymakers and practitioners find more intelligent solutions in dealing with radicalization and political violence.

The Kanishka Project<sup>vii</sup>. The Kanishka Project is a Canadian research program specifically about terrorism. Since 2011, 10 million dollars funded 35 research projects dealing with violent extremism or religious conversion.

The collection of data about terrorism is something new and it is difficult to obtain clear and reliable data for fact older than 20 years. Similarly, it is still a science struggling to prove himself. The interpretation of the data and figures collected is still controversial.

By its very nature, terrorism has no borders. Cooperation between states is essential in the fight against terrorism. It is in the common interest that countries reach an agreement on a legal framework at international level and follow the obligations arising from the UN Security Council resolutions on counter-terrorism using tools provided by the universal counter-terrorism conventions and protocols in a need to create a real and effective global cooperation network<sup>viii</sup>. The international cooperation within UN is vital to legitimate the fight against terrorism on a global scale, providing a supporting role for weaker states and a supranational capacity constraint. This legitimacy is really important, especially when the first response to terrorism is war. War in Afghanistan; war in Iraq; war in Libya; numerous military interventions in Africa, for example to protect Mali against Boko Haram; and now a very complex war situation in Syria to fight Isis.

Let's take a look at the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Isis represents the new face of terrorism, emerging from the ashes left by the "War on Terror". Isis is a terrorist group, powerful enough to control territories, to proclaim an Islamic Caliphate in June 2014 and to launch large-scale terrorist operations in Europe. According to the 9/11 Commission Report, the financing to plan and conduct the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 is estimated between 400,000 and 500,000 dollars. In 2015, the CIA estimated the Isis financial inflows between one and two million dollars daily. Isis "works" with a war booty of more than one billion dollars. The organization also benefits from important material and human resources: about 300 tanks, artillery, several thousand Humvee vehicles recovered on Iraqi army, and more than 50,000 men in<sup>ix</sup>. How is this possible? How can terrorism be so powerful when the world is engaged in a hard struggle against terrorism since 2001?

The fight against terrorism has also created more problem than it solved. Facing crisis, military interventions remains the policy tool of the Western countries to the detriment of diplomacy. We can compare the reactions of President Bush in 2001 and president Hollande in 2015. Same speeches and same response: bombing. Wars without the proper diplomatic means have given way to a weak political system and a lack of legitimacy of the government. The low legitimacy can be observed specially in Iraq where Sunnis were kept away of the Iraqi transition and suffered a serious crisis of representation in the Iraq policy for over ten years. Successive military interventions do not bring by themselves a definitive peace. Under international pressures peace agreements gave birth to fragile solutions<sup>x</sup>. That's also why the situation in Syria is so complex. There is no agreement on what to do to ensure the stability of the region providing to terrorist organizations a fertile ground where they grow.

War also means refugees. Never since World War II have more people in the world been forced to flee their homes, according to the Munich Security Report 2016<sup>xi</sup>. The UNHCR has found that the number of refugees and internally displaced persons has crossed the sad record mark of 60 million in 2015. In Europe alone, more than 1 million refugees and migrants arrived. And Europe needed a

photo of a dead child on a beach to finally take care of the problem of refugees. How many died in Mediterranean Sea before Europe awakes?

The cooperation in the fight against terrorism also shows its limits. In 2001 General Massoud tried to prevent the danger posed by the Taliban. Nobody listened. Years later, no one paid attention to what was happening in Iraq. In January 2014, US President Barack Obama famously compared the Isis terrorist group to a junior sports team that just pretended to be the real deal. Even within the inter-state institution the communication of sensitive information is taken lightly. The information that the brothers Abdeslam planning an attack was in the hands of the Belgium federal police since July 2014 but no one seems to consider this information with the seriousness it requires until November 2015 and their involvement in Paris attacks<sup>xii</sup>.

And what about the stigmatization suffered by Muslims? Since 2001 it's really difficult to be a Muslim in a western country. In United States first, now in France and Europe Muslims must face the ignorance of people. "Arab, Muslim, Islamist? What's the difference?" Ignorance is the root of intolerance. According to Europol only 2% of terrorist attacks in Europe are committed by Islamists. The global Terrorist Index shows that nearly 9 out of 10 victims of terrorist attacks are Muslims. Muslims are suffering the most from radical terrorism.

What changed in the fight against terrorism since 2001? Not much unfortunately. Speeches did not evolve; the first response to terrorism is still a military intervention. The international community still doesn't understand that diplomacy and a long-term policy are needed to strongly reduce the threat of terrorism. And still forgets a simple truth: people gets tired of seeing bombs falling, even if they were dropped by ally. Europe is building walls to face the influx of refugees. Fundamental rights in countries fighting terrorism are threatened, and Muslims still stigmatized. Meanwhile the CIA seems to believe that the fate of the world depends on a way to crack the security of Apple's devices.

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