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Issue Brief

25 years of the Global War on Terror

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Summary

The kinetic successes achieved as part of the Global War on Terror over a quarter of a century, while critical in the fight against global terrorism, have been significantly outpaced by the evolving nature of violent extremism, geopolitical fissures, and the opposing interests of some key players. These factors have threatened to undermine the counter-terror campaign's legacy.

Introduction

A critical examination of the Global War on Terror, launched in response to the 9/11 terror attacks in September 2001, reveals that not only have subsequent American administrations been challenged in eliminating the ideological fervour that drives and sustains violent extremist movements, but the post-9/11 counter-violent extremist framework itself has become fractured.

The Council on Foreign Relations, in an evaluation of the terrorism landscape 25 years after 9/11, notes that

> the United States marks the anniversary of the worst terrorist attack on U.S. soil with a stunning lack of preparedness to handle mounting new threats and resurgent old ones. … Combined with the weaponization of social media by digitally savvy terrorists, the country faces the phenomenon of increasingly lethal autonomous weapons and emerging populations of radicalized youth.[1]

Moreover, increasing geopolitical polarisation and contestations have prevented state actors from cooperating on overlapping security concerns. It was the 9/11 terror attacks executed by Osama bin Laden-led Al-Qaeda and the refuge the movement found in Taliban 1.0-led Afghanistan that triggered the Global War on Terror 25 years ago. However, the initiative has gradually hollowed out because it could not accommodate changing realities.

The Ground Realities

Despite the kinetic successes achieved in decapitating the key leadership of parent terror organisations, particularly Al-Qaeda and later even the proto-state established by ISIS in Syria and Iraq, the Global War on Terror has left behind a complex legacy. In Afghanistan, there was a dependency on hard power and the imposition of a top-down Western democratic model in a highly decentralised tribal society. The invasion of Iraq and allowing Nouri al-Maliki, the former Iraqi Prime Minister, to cultivate deep-rooted sectarian fissures created conditions for the surge of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, later rebranded as ISIS.

An uneasy alliance was also forged with Pakistan. Despite being an active—albeit reluctant—member of the United States' war on terror, it aided and abetted the sustenance of the Afghan Taliban, including members of the Haqqani network, who

[1] Bruce Hoffman and Farah Pandith, **"Twenty-Five Years after 9/11, the United States is Unprepared for Terrorism's Next Wave"**, Expert Speak, Council on Foreign Relations, 8 September 2026.

were directly pitted against allied forces between 2001 and 2021. Pakistan's tribal areas acted as hubs that housed Taliban soldiers and leaders for two decades, while the state machinery was complicit in providing them with operational and logistical support for their campaign against allied forces. Furthermore, documented records reveal that the Afghan Taliban, in the run-up to the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, provided sanctuary to Al-Qaeda's rank and file and refused to hand over bin Laden to American authorities.[2]

Today, not only is the Afghan Taliban back in power in Afghanistan following the withdrawal of allied forces in August 2021, but they are also the primary force that the United States is informally relying on to neutralise Islamic State in Khorasan Province, a regional affiliate of ISIS. The United Nations Security Council meeting held in June 2026 underscored the persisting concern of the continued presence of Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan.[3] This comes despite the Taliban regime previously assuring the international community that it would disallow terror groups from operating on Afghan soil. Developments such as this are taking place against the broader backdrop of the United States removing a multi-million dollar bounty previously placed on Ahmed al-Sharaa's (formerly an ISIS and Al-Qaeda operative turned President of Syria) head, following the conclusion of the al-Assad family's decades-long rule over Syria.

Decentralisation of Violent Extremism

One of the fundamental challenges the broad counter-terrorism strategy has faced, more so recently, is that post-organisational violent extremism, which essentially refers to decentralised and networked violent extremism, has not featured as a growing concern for policymakers. Today, even in the absence of parent violent extremist outfits or movements, terror affiliates attached to Al-Qaeda, ISIS, the Proud Boys, and online networks such as Terrorgram, which are inspired by a combination of neo-Nazi, white supremacist and militant accelerationist ideologies, have been able to foment continuous instability. This persists despite territorial losses, organisational degradation, leadership decapitation, arrests, crackdowns, and increased surveillance of executive leadership.

[2] **"Taliban File Update: U.S. Pressed Taliban to Expel Usama bin Laden Over 30 Times, Only Three Approaches in First Year of Bush Administration"**, The National Security Archive, 19 March 2004; **"Newly Published Documents Cast Doubt on Claims Taliban Will Give Up al Qaeda"**, National Security Archive, 23 September 2021.

[3] **"The Situation in Afghanistan – Security Council, 10165th Meeting"**, Transcript, United Nations, 8 June 2026.

At the same time, the legacy of the Global War on Terror is that the broader security architecture has failed to adjust its initial objectives to the changing nature of financial transactions, including through wallet layering available on cryptocurrency platforms. As outlined in President Bush's address in November 2001, one of the aims of the war on terror centred around themes such as severing the financial pipelines of those who were complicit in promoting terrorism.[4]

Nevertheless, the zeitgeist 25 years later reflects that individuals with no prior criminal record can act as couriers or temporary recipients of money used to finance terrorism, making it difficult to trace the money trail even through regular banking channels. Unregulated cryptocurrency platforms have become a preferred mode of swift transfers between violent extremist ecosystems, such as that of ISIS. Simply put, the war on terror and the vision outlined to achieve the goals laid out to defeat terrorism in 2001 have not been adequately adjusted over the years since their launch, thereby undermining their very purpose.

An Expansive Threat Spectrum

These trends and developments are especially concerning in a zeitgeist continually redefined by emerging technology, such as generative artificial intelligence and deepfakes, gaming sub-cultures and social media algorithms. In the contemporary period, the digitisation of violent extremism has emerged as one of the key facilitators of the ideological resilience of violent non-state actors. The conducive ecosystem provided by the digital domain for archiving, disseminating and recycling violent extremist propaganda and narratives has allowed perpetrators and sympathisers to maintain a garb of anonymity. Through this shield, they continue to incite, instigate, radicalise, and recruit impressionable individuals to carry out subversive acts worldwide.

This occurs even as ISIS continues to build a 'digital Caliphate' while maintaining terror affiliates (wilayats/provinces) as part of its doctrinal strategy of '*Baqiya wa Tatamaddad*' (Remaining and Expanding) following its territorial defeat in Syria in March 2019. Through this strategy, it remains an enduring global threat, despite facing pressure after the neutralisation of its head of global operations and senior commander, Abu Bilal al-Minuki, in Nigeria in May 2026. One manifestation is

[4] **"President Announces Crackdown on Terrorist Financial Network"**, The US Department of State, 7 November 2001.

visible in the digitisation of violence by violent extremist supporters, often cutting across religious and ideological lines. Even without formal affiliation with ISIS, these individuals have contributed significantly to its ideological endurance in the post-2019 era.

A report released by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue in September 2026 reiterates how territorial losses and organisational degradation have not translated into a loss of ideological appeal for ISIS, which is now being amplified through the glorification of violence in the digital domain. The report notes that

> Slop jihad content—low-quality digital content produced in part, or in whole, by artificial intelligence in service of the 'media jihad'—is changing the contours of the aesthetics of decentralised jihadist ecosystems online… TikTok is the most important platform for Slop Jihad content … Slop Jihad content is being leveraged to troll 'enemies' such as Shias, Yazidis and Christians, as well as other users who support mass casualty attackers who have targeted Muslims.[5]

The role of terror affiliates also remains particularly significant for weakened organisations like Al-Qaeda. Despite being pushed to the margins of the Salafi-Jihadi discourse, the group has relied on offshoots and affiliated movements in Africa's Sahel region, notably JNIM, as well as Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen. Through these proxies, it seeks to mount a comeback against both its Salafi-Jihadi rivals in ISIS and the far enemy—namely the West, including Americans and Europeans.

The United Nations Security Council's thirty-eighth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, released in August 2026, notes that

> Both Al-Qaida and ISIL (Da'esh) continued to look for more opportunities to target foreigners and extort businesses. The revenue generated through kidnapping was likely used to support attacks across their global networks. The ransom payment of approximately $50 million noted in the Monitoring Team's thirty-seventh report (S/2026/44, para. 107) played a key role in financing the Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) offensive in Mali. At the same time, a portion of the funds was likely channelled to the broader Al-Qaida network.[6]

[5] **"Generation 'Slop Jihad:' The Decentralized 'Media Jihad' Gets Sloppy"**, Digital Dispatches, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 8 September 2026.

[6] **"Monitoring Team's Thirty-eight Report"**, Report, United Nations Security Council, 10 August 2026.

Trump's Re-Orientation

The fragmentation within the post-9/11 security architecture and the Global War on Terror is also evident in the latest counter-terrorism strategy released by the Trump 2.0 administration in May 2026. Right at the outset, the introduction to the detailed policy document is headlined 'Good versus Bad Counterterrorism'.[7] This reflects the federal government's effort to draw a moral distinction between different categories of counter-terrorism efforts. A deeper dive into the concept also makes it clear that enemies from within—namely those considered to be in pursuit of 'ideologies antithetical to freedom and the American way of life'—are the primary targets of a reformed counter-terror strategy.[8] This reflects the prevalence of politicisation surrounding violent extremism.

This shift in strategic outlook is partially reminiscent of the McCarthy era that dominated much of the 1950s political landscape in the United States during the ideological confrontation with the erstwhile Soviet Union. The fragmentation of the post-9/11 framework has also accelerated within the American context due to shifting threat matrices and the re-conceptualisation of what constitutes a threat to the homeland and to American interests abroad. Despite sporadic intervals where prominent ISIS leaders are neutralised through American involvement, the current administration has dramatically transformed the contours of the war on terror. It has reoriented its focus away from far-right extremism towards organised crime, foreign leadership, drug cartels and defunct left-wing extremist elements, while maintaining only a nominal focus on 'legacy Islamist terrorists' as designated priority areas.

Notably, the May 2026 United States Counterterrorism Strategy outlines three major types of terror groups: narco-terrorists and transnational gangs; Legacy Islamist Terrorists; and Violent Left-Wing Extremists, including Anarchists and Anti-Fascists.[9] The document fundamentally overlooks how the global threat spectrum has been altered by violent non-state actors weaponising technology and the digital ecosystem. These developments continue to unfold faster than state agencies can regulate them.

[7] **"United States Counterterrorism Strategy"**, The White House, May 2026.

[8] Ibid.

[9] **"United States Counterterrorism Strategy"**, no. 6.

Conclusion

When examining the legacy of the Global War on Terror 25 years after its launch, it is also vital to point towards some of the critical achievements during this phase. They range from the prevention of large-scale terror attacks similar to 9/11 on American soil, to the upgrading of aviation and border infrastructure, the neutralisation of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, and the listing of major terror entities under the United Nations sanctions regime.

However, ultimately, these milestones cannot eclipse the strategic fatigue that has set in across the post-9/11 world order. Moreover, the persistence of terror sanctuaries, a decentralised and technology-driven violent extremist ecosystem, geopolitical contestations, and the politicisation of terrorism and counter-terrorism have enabled the endurance of violent extremist movements.

Twenty-five years later, the strategic logic of the Global War on Terror remains complex. The lessons drawn indicate that while kinetic force can achieve operational targets, eradicating violent extremism at the root requires a much more sober approach to confront the twin challenges of ideological resilience alongside the conflicting and evolving interests of key stakeholders.

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