



Two decades and two years since 9/11 attack: is the 'war against terror' a success?

Adeleke ADEGBAMI

Department of Public Administration
Olabisi Onabanjo University
Ago-Iwoye, Nigeria
adeadegbami@yahoo.com

Akeem Adewale GANIYU

Department of Public Administration
The Polytechnic Ibadan
Oyo State, Nigeria
ganiyuakeem4sure@gmail.com



Abstract. *The September 11, 2001 attack on the United States by the terrorist groups is no doubt a shocking one which forced the then President George Bush and his administration to vehemently vowed; to carry out a war against terror. Consequently, the United States, partnering with other countries across the globe under the auspices of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), made real, President Bush's vowed and embarked on full-scale military operations against the terrorists. The efforts of the GWOT at suppressing the terrorists notwithstanding, their activities have continued to escalate. In the course of the war against terror, over seven thousand Americans have died, while hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and Afghans have lost their lives. The costs of procuring the war on terror by joint military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan stood between \$2 to \$4 trillion, apart from material losses that remain unquantifiable. Given the reality on the ground, the study concluded that, although the war against terrorism has achieved some levels of success, however, the purpose of the declaration of war has not been fully realized. The study thus recommends that the underlying causes of terrorism should be, adequately addressed, for the war on terror to be effective. The United States and its allies should also re-assess the approaches they have been using against the terrorist groups and adjust the approaches appropriately.*

Keywords: *Al-Qaeda, Counterterrorism, GWOT, Terrorism, 9/11 Attack.*

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1. Introduction

September 11, 2001, marked an epoch in the annals history of the United States of America and terrorist assault against the country. That was the day the Al-Qaeda machinists group hijacked and controlled four commercial airliners, and subsequently ran two of them into the World Trade Centre in New York; the third plane was directed to the United States military headquarters at the Pentagon in Washington, while the fourth plane was forced to crash-land in Shanksville, Pennsylvania (Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh & Larkin, 2003). The aftermath of the attack was the leveling of the World Trade Center in New York and damaging the Pentagon in Washington. Beyond this was the untimely death of about three thousand civilians, while several people lost vital organs and parts of their bodies in the incident, and a lot of businesses, as well as properties worth several millions of dollars, were utterly shattered. The attack was considered the deadliest terrorist attack carried on United States soil (Paust, 2003; Byman, 2003; Bergen 2023).

Although Afghanistan is believed and regarded as the base of the Al-Qaeda terrorist group, the country is considered a place where all terrorists' agendas are being decided. This belief nonetheless, there was no single Afghan national out of the nineteen men linked with the militant Islamist group Al-Qaeda, that led the September 11 attacks. Mohammed Atta who was the leader of the group, for instance, is from Egypt, fifteen members of the group were from Saudi Arabia; two of them were from the United Arab Emirates, while one is from Lebanon (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023).

The September 11, 2001, attack came as a rude shock to the United States in particular and to the world in general. The incident dealt a blow to the United States and Mr. George Bush who was then the United States president (Bram, Orr & Rapaport, 2002; Paust, 2003). This perhaps made George Bush vowed and resolved to “win the war against terrorism” by all means possible. President Bush, to this extent, solicited an all-inclusive planning and agreement among global leaders and countries across the world to put an end to terrorist activities and terrorism around the world (Pew Research Center, 2021).

Terrorism could be simply seen as acts or actions of aggression directed against civilians to pursue political or ideological targets (United Nations, 2018). On the other hand, “war against terror” or “war on terrorism”, is coined to denote the global counterterrorism operation led by America, in response to the September 11, 2001,

attacks carried out by the militants linked with the Islamic extremist group Al-Qaeda against the United States (National Archives, n.d.). The Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), or the War on Terror was the initiative of the United States and, it became an official global affair. GWOT was put together to combat and counteract the terrorists and check their activities following their cruel attack on the United States on September 11, 2001 (Buzan, 2006; The US Department of State, n.d.).

In essence, bin Laden the leaders of Al-Qaeda, the Taliban regime, and its allies in Afghanistan were the target of the Global War on Terrorism's counterterrorism campaigns (Posen, 2001; Byman, 2003). The President of the United States Mr. Bush in association with global leaders under the auspices of the Global War on Terrorism demanded from the terrorists, without hesitation to hand over the leaders of the Al-Qaeda militant group hiding in Afghanistan territories or face the wrath and consequences that might follow. Suffice it to say that, the counterterrorism efforts of the GWOT at the initial phase were mainly targeted at Afghanistan and Iraq (Posen, 2001; Byman, 2003).

Following President Bush's declaration to tackle the menace of terrorism, one of the steps taken in conjunction with the Global War on Terror was the blockage of the finances available to terrorists (Clunan, 2006). The step was supported by coalition partners across the globe, particularly the partner countries that participated in the GWOT. Therefore, aside from warning the Taliban from sheltering members of Al-Qaeda, President Bush; on September 24, 2001; announced the signing of an executive order freezing the assets of terrorist groups and allied entities that are sponsoring their activities. In addition, there was the promise that GWOT would not stop its activities until terrorism was eradicated (CNN, 2001; Roth, Greenburg & Wille, 2004). With the promises and vows to nip terrorism in the bud, this study assesses the extent to which the war against terror has been carried out.

2. Terrorism and the Need to Counter It

Terrorism has been in the world for many centuries, at least in the past three millennia (Forst, 2012). The United Nations account reveals that the word "terrorism" was coined to refer to the Reign of Terror, during the period of the French Revolution between September 5, 1793, and July 27, 1794. This was a

period when the Revolutionary Government orchestrated violence and tough measures on citizens opposing the Revolution (United Nations, 2018).

Prior to the formation of sovereign nation-states, there have been skirmishes among men to either defend their communities or territories or to overcome others. This has not been without causing injury or damage to nonmilitant populations. Some of these skirmishes include - the invasion of the kingdom of Judah and annihilation of temples in Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, Babylon's ruler, in the Sixth Century BCE; the assassinations of Julius Caesar, the Roman Emperors in 44 BCE; Caligula in 41 CE, Galba in 68 CE, Domitian in 96 CE, Commodus in 193 CE, and others – are often cited as examples of early acts of terrorism (Forst, 2012).

Other instances of terrorists' activities were that of assassinations of Czar Alexander II in 1881, by the Russian revolutionary group; and Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria on 28 June 1914 (Walzer, 1977), among others. It must be noted that the above-mentioned occurrences can be categorized under target attack and the victims were targeted. The targeted assassination was a violent method of spreading terror by terrorist groups, it carries a serious personal risk to them, but it portrayed them as political martyrdom. Nevertheless, targeted assassination perhaps was a bit humane, as only the targeted people are assassinated, unlike civil war where anybody can be killed (Morozov, 1880).

However, following the technological improvements in the late nineteenth century, the pattern of operation of terrorism has changed and its activities have been on the rise. Technological developments have enhanced the production of dangerous weapons like dynamite which allowed terrorists to carry out their lethal acts more extensively and dangerously. Besides, the mass communication technologies and social media development, allowed news to be disseminated rapidly across long distances. This perhaps, opened a forum of inspiration for terrorist groups and their sympathizers across the world and allowed them to monitor the dastardly activities as they are happening, and mobilize further support. The development of different means of transportation equally gave the terrorist groups in their millions the opportunity to travel long distances to carry out their mission.

Lending credence to the above, Smith (2002), states that no doubt terrorism has for long been a disastrous feature of the world, but the recent terrorism operations were quantitatively and qualitatively different from those of the past. The recent form of terrorism encompassed a far-reaching arrangement by a group of terrorists that

traverse nationality and operate from many countries. With regards to the 11 September attacks, Smith emphasizes that the attacks were calculated as transcontinental attacks. It was a daring attack from established organizations that maintained a worldwide presence in not less than fifty countries, and being controlled from Afghanistan. The organization has the advantage of the crops of technology, vis-à-vis “satellite technology, accessible air travel, fax machines, the internet, and other modern conveniences to advance its political agenda” (Smith, 2002, p. 23-35).

Since September 11, 2001, when the terrorist attacks on the United States of America, there has been growing international support for efficient and effective counter-terrorism measures and responses. The event has equally yielded a better international collaboration in waging war against terrorism, particularly terrorism groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Syria and the Levant.

Given the dangerous and destructive dimension the activities of terrorists have taken, there is no way the governments of the world would have folded their arms and watched the situation getting out of hand before they could take necessary action to counteract the heinous activities. Folding arms at this critical stage of technological advancement and the rise in terrorist recruitments and activities could spell doom for the world if the world did not rise in time to check the menaces. This is because, terrorism has continued to threaten people's security, international stability, and prosperity, and undermining the core values of the world, especially since terrorist activities neither know no border, nor nationality or religion. In essence, the world needs to rise and counter-terrorism; as their activities in all their forms and materializations are serious crimes without justification (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, n.d.).

3. 9/11 Attack: A Review of International Law on Terrorism

The analysis of extant international law as agreed to by international lawyers across the world shows that the events of September 11, 2001, in respect of cruelties perpetrated by terrorist groups in the United States were purely illegal. Put differently, the atrocities committed by terrorist groups have no legal explanation. The attack could be seen and regarded as “a new phenomenon” in the anal of terrorism activities because, the event fell outside the standing framework of

international law, especially when the scenario is viewed from the perspective of a non-state actor challenging one superpower of the world (Greenwood, 2002).

The United States' reaction to the events, especially by resorting to force against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban regime, the accompanying hostilities; and the treatment meted out to prisoners among other issues attached to combating terrorist groups have all become subjects of controversy. In essence, the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001, was unprecedented given the fact that it was carried out by terrorist organizations who operated outside the control of any state, and as such, the event did not fit into any of the recognizable categories of international law. The Security Council in its resolution 1456 (2003) states that:

States must ensure that any measure taken to combat terrorism complies with all their obligations under international law and should adopt such measures by international law, in particular international human rights, refugee, and humanitarian law (cited in The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2009, p. 1).

With the above resolution by the Security Council arm of the United Nations, there has been a growing body of international laws promulgated to wage war against terrorism. The laws create a structure and platform for cooperation among different countries of the world within which terrorism activities can be prevented and countered effectively. The international laws specify the framework which includes instruments that tackle particular aspects of counter-terrorism together with other instruments designed for international collaboration in areas such as criminal law, human rights protection refugees, or laws of war establishing a broader context within which counterterrorism activities transpire.

According to Robert (n.d.), although there are laws of war which are parts and parcels of international law, which address many issues attached to combating terrorist movements, however, applying such laws during military operations against terrorists has always been problematic. This is because most of the time what normally occur during counterterrorist operation can be different from what was envisaged and documented in the laws of war.

Yoo and Ho (2003) state that, the war on terrorism has generated two legal questions. The first, question is whether the attacks of September 11, 2001, actually induced a war, or “international armed conflict”? The second question is whether the legal procedures governing the status and handling of members of Al-Qaeda, as

well as, the Taliban militia who conspired and harbored the terrorists in Afghanistan are adhered to or not? The questions and controversies raised notwithstanding, the United States government has decided and determined that unjustifiably attacks on the country on September 11, 2001, have put the country in a situation where war must be applied. Besides, the event has equally shown that the Al-Qaeda terrorist group and its Taliban ally are unlawful soldiers or fighters under the existing laws of war, thereby have no right to legal protections, and such rights given to legal belligerents, especially, “prisoners of war status” under the Third Geneva Convention of 1949 (Yoo and Ho, 2003).

4. The Countermeasures Against Terrorism

Counter-Terrorism (CT) measures are actions taken at the international level to prevent and tackle the terrorist threat. Counter-terrorism measures and sanctions are from time to time considered to mean the same thing. This is because, some sanctions targeted at terrorist groups add to the overall fight against terrorism, especially their financial power. Other CT sanctions may include - a travel ban on people and freeze of assets, and proscription of natural persons and entities from generating funds and economic resources. Thus, there is an intersection between CT measures and sanctions with regard to CT. The difference between the two lies in the fact that a lot of sanctions regimes are not terrorism-related, so also, are some CT measures that are not sanctions regimes (European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, n.d.).

The U.S. Department of State has noted that terrorist groups including – Al-Qaeda, ISIS, and Hizballah have relentlessly planned attacks against the United States and its supporters. The United States and its allies and partners on the other hand have continued to build global consensus to cut down their activities. The countermeasures against terrorism as planned by the United States and its supporters include diplomatic engagement and foreign assistance, essential for preventing, degrading, detecting, as well as, responding to terrorist threats. Other measures are – strengthening the law enforcing the judicial competencies, intensifying aviation and border security, extending global information dissemination, blocking terrorist finance sources, improving response to the crisis, and counter-violent radicalism. Through global arrangements, allied countries are

encouraged to build the capacity to tackle terrorism in their different localities (U.S. Department of State, n.d.).

According to the *Ministere De L'Europe Et Des Affaires Etrangeres* (n.d.), the objectives of countermeasures against terrorism are many, they include to: cut down the terrorist groups' regional hold; stopping the financial, logistic, human, and terrorist propaganda networks; and checking radicalization; among other goals. To achieve these objectives, the action that must be taken includes: putting up unwavering military action; calming down liberated areas and pursuing political solutions to conflicts; and improving international support to fight terrorist sources of finance among others.

5. The Campaign Against International Terrorism: Has It Failed?

Terrorism no doubt, is a threat to peace, security, stability, human rights, as well as, the rule of law. Terrorism is inimical to socio-economic development and democracy. For that reason, terrorism must be prevented and suppressed.

As a result of the September 11, 2001 attack on the United States, the government of the United States instigated an international war on terrorism. The war on terrorism put up by the United States government and allied countries was a well-defined military involvement targeted at nation-building and restructuring of Middle Eastern politics. The steps and strategies taken by the United States as of 2017 have not only destabilized the Middle East but have also been unable to protect the United States completely from terrorism. Thrall & Goepner (2017), to this extent, have argued that some years after strategic steadiness under President George Bush (2001-2009), President Barack Obama (2009-2017), and President Donald Trump (2017-2021), the War on Terror could be said to have failed. According to them, the failure of the war has two central but interrelated sources. In the first instance, the terror threat facing the United States was exaggerated in terms of assessment. This consequently orchestrated an expansive counterterrorism operation that failed to protect Americans from terrorist attacks. In the second instance, the use and application of an aggressive strategy through military intervention could be seen as a source of failure of the war on terrorism (Thrall & Goepner, 2017).

Assessing the war against terror, the U.S. Department of State (2019), states that, the United States along with its partners had been able to defeat the terrorist groups in 2019. With support from the Global Coalition, they have been able to defeat ISIS and the professed “caliphate” in Iraq and Syria in March 2019. This was followed by another military operation that led to the termination of the life of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the self-proclaimed “caliph” of ISIS, in October. The United States and its supporting countries enforced new sanctions on Tehran and its surrogates, this was to checkmate the Iranian government from sponsoring the world's nastiest state of terrorism. Furthermore, the United States in April 2019, designated Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which includes its Qods Force, as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO), this was the first time a designation of such was applied to part of another government. As this was ongoing, different countries of Western Europe and South America continued to join the United States in designating Iran-backed Hizballah as a terrorist organization.

The successes recorded above as documented by the U.S. Department of State (2019), notwithstanding, precarious terrorist threats continued unabated across the world. For instance, even though ISIS has lost its leader and territory, the group still adjusted, adapted, and continues to mobilize and stimulate followers to fight, even from the territories of its associates across the globe. It is equally important to note that it was during this period that, ISIS became deeply rooted in Africa, to the extent that the group established several new branches and networks, particularly in 2019. ISIS-affiliated groups then became more active across the continent, and well-established in the Lake Chad region, the Sahel, and East Africa. Besides, in South and Southeast Asia, ISIS affiliates have continued to carry out a series of attacks. One of such attack was the April 21, 2019, Sri Lanka attack carried out by ISIS. It was a coordinated series of attacks targeted at churches and hotels. On that fateful Easter Sunday, not less than 250 devotees, tourists, as well as onlookers including five United States citizens were killed. In addition, was several people who were maimed and tormented (Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2021; Glazzard & Reed, 2021).

The terrorist groups also remained resilient, continuing to multiply and posing threats in Africa, the Middle East, and some other places. For instance, in the Horn of Africa, the Al Shabaab continued to pose a threat; in the Sahel was the Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin, while Hayat Tahrir al-Sham/Al-Nusrah was operating

in Syria. These set of terrorist groups become more active and dangerous and continue to threaten the peace and tranquility of their different bases.

O'Hanlon & Windholz (2021) in their study equally affirm the failure of the war on terror. Their assessment is based on the fact that despite the counter-terrorism efforts, terrorism has continued to endure, especially in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia regions. Beyond what it was in 2001, the number of attacks from terrorist groups and casualties worldwide is about five times higher yearly. As such, “the so-called global war on terror has largely failed”, especially since, terrorist organizations find it easier and faster to recruit members beyond “what Washington can capture, kill, or deter” (O'Hanlon & Windholz, 2021, para. 2).

In a similar vein, Van Evera (2006), admitted that Al-Qaeda and its allies constitute a threat to the United States' safety, as well as committed a grave menace against the country, however, the responses of the United States towards terrorism have not been adequate. He further states that instead of focusing and waging war in four dimensions the United States and its allies only concentrated on one. They only concentrated comprehensively on an offensive campaign against Al-Qaeda overseas, thereby, neglecting homeland defense; ignored safeguarding weapons and materials of mass destruction from being stolen or purchased by terrorists (Van Evera, 2006). All these vital fronts are where the United States and its allies have missed it, and as such, have not been able to record the expected result in war against terror.

Concerning human and financial resources, the war on terror has not fared better either. The human and financial resources put up against terrorism also exceeded what was projected and imagined. O'Hanlon & Windholz (2021) put the price of the joint military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan at between \$2 to \$4 trillion. On human resources, over seven thousand Americans have died in the two countries, while hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and Afghans have lost their lives too in the course of waging the “war against terror”.

6. Conclusion

The attack of September 11, 2001, by the terrorist groups is no doubt a devastating one which forced President George Bush and his administration to vehemently vow; to carry out a war against terror. And so, the United States and partners across the globe made real, President Bush vowed and embarked on full-scale military

operations. Some months after the attacks, the United States and its partners forcefully drove out the Taliban regime along with its Al-Qaeda supporters and sponsors away from Afghanistan. Beyond the United States' expectation with regard to the challenges presented by Al-Qaeda and its allied terrorist groups, the post-September 11 world, more than before; witnessed the spring up of many other terrorist groups causing more deadly activities.

Given the reality on the ground, the purpose of the declaration of war against terrorism has not been fully realized. Therefore, instead of suppressing the terrorist organizations, their activities have continued to escalate, as the group continues to flourish in their heinous activities. The costs of the war on terror remain unquantifiable given the number of casualties, material losses, as well as; financial losses. Not until the underlying causes of terrorism are adequately addressed, the war on terror will remain ineffective. It is, therefore, necessary for the United States and its allies to re-assess the approach they have been using so far against the terrorist groups, and if possible, adjust the approach appropriately. The use of military intervention could be reviewed, while the United States and other countries fortify their intelligence and law enforcement structures to firmly secure and cut down the threat of terrorism in their territories.

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