



Post-9/11 US Military Interventions and Human Rights Abuses

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Abstract

This research paper critically examines the United States' military interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya following the September 11, 2001 attacks, within the context of the global "War on Terror." This study uses a qualitative research methodology, analyzing secondary sources through literature analysis to examine the U.S. military interventions and their human rights implications. It explores the justifications provided by the U.S. for these invasions and delves into the human rights violations that occurred under American military actions. Additionally, the paper scrutinizes the U.S.'s role as a self-proclaimed advocate for human rights during this period, questioning the consistency of its actions with its professed values. The research also analyzes how these interventions have shaped global perceptions of the U.S. and its human rights record. It highlights American foreign policy's complex and often contradictory nature in the post-9/11 era. However, the study recommends that the U.S. adopt a more consistent and transparent approach to human rights in its foreign policy, ensuring its actions align with its stated values and commitments to global justice.

Keywords: U.S. military interventions, War on Terror, human rights violations, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, foreign policy

Introduction

On September 11, 2001, 19 individuals associated with the Al-Qaeda terrorist group hijacked four planes en route to the western United States. Two of the planes deliberately crashed into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York, another struck the Pentagon, and the fourth, aimed initially at the White House, was brought down by the passengers before it could reach its target. Among the 2,977 victims were 19 of the attackers themselves. Al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for the attacks, citing the United States' actions in the Middle East as the motive (Izak, 2021).

The attacks sent shockwaves through the United States, sparking widespread fear and anger. This, in turn, led to a surge of anti-Muslim sentiment, with many erroneously associating all Muslims with terrorism. In response, President George W. Bush quickly declared a "War on Terror," emphasizing that nations must choose to stand with the U.S. or with the terrorists. Given the Afghan government's close ties to Al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations, the U.S. launched military operations in Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, soon followed by attacks on Libya and Iraq. Despite these actions, global security remained precarious, with NATO member countries and other global powers becoming involved (Aydemir, 2022).

The consequences of these wars were far-reaching. Leaders like Saddam Hussein of Iraq and Muammar Gaddafi of Libya were ousted and killed, and entire regions surrounding the countries involved were destabilized. Pakistan, though not involved in the



9/11 attacks, was accused of harboring terrorists, especially after Osama Bin Laden, the mastermind behind the attacks, was found and killed in Abbottabad, Pakistan, in 2011 (Held, 2016).

Over the years, scholars and policymakers have grappled with the consequences of the post-9/11 military interventions. The wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya have been both justified and heavily criticized, with ongoing debates about whether the U.S. had ulterior motives. The impact of these conflicts has been profound, leading to massive humanitarian crises, a sharp decline in living conditions across the affected regions, and widespread economic disruption. While the U.S. and its allies claim to have pursued these wars to eliminate terrorism, the global consequences remain a subject of intense debate (Pearlstein, 2022).

The wars have significantly changed the world, altering major powers' policies and raising questions about their true objectives. Whether these actions made the world safer or left a legacy of destruction remains an open question. The lasting effects on human rights, regional stability, and the global economy suggest that more questions than answers have marked the post-9/11 era. Scholars continue to reflect on whether the aftermath of these wars was ultimately worth the cost. Therefore, this study aims to critically assess the long-term consequences of the U.S.-led military interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, focusing on their impact on global security, human rights, and regional stability. By examining the justifications for these interventions and their outcomes, the study seeks to understand whether the intended objectives of combating terrorism and promoting democracy were achieved or led to further instability and suffering.

Problem Statement

The United States has consistently cited the fight against terrorism and the protection of human rights as key justifications for its military interventions in various countries. However, it is crucial to assess whether these justifications were truly warranted, particularly when the U.S. has been accused of infringing upon the sovereignty of nations based on often unfounded allegations. The possibility that self-interest, rather than a genuine concern for human rights, drives U.S. foreign policy cannot be overlooked. It is contradictory for the U.S. to claim it is intervening to protect human rights while simultaneously committing violations in conflict zones. Furthermore, there is a growing perception that Western powers, particularly the U.S., use human rights rhetoric to reinforce their global dominance. The prevalence of warfare in Muslim-majority countries has further shaped the controversial nature of these interventions. This study aims to critically examine these issues, exploring the inconsistencies in the U.S. approach and providing a clearer understanding of the underlying motives behind its actions.



Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its ability to offer a comprehensive analysis of the long-term repercussions of the U.S.-led military interventions following the September 11 attacks. By critically examining the outcomes of these wars, the study aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on global security, human rights, and the ethical implications of military interventions. The findings will provide valuable insights for policymakers, scholars, and global citizens, helping to understand better the complex relationship between national security and the protection of civil liberties. Additionally, the study's exploration of these conflicts' economic, humanitarian, and geopolitical consequences will serve as an important resource for future international relations strategies, fostering a more nuanced approach to global interventions in the pursuit of peace and stability.

Research Questions

1. To what extent did the USA provide the justifications for the invasions of Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya warranted?
2. In what manner did America's utilization of the human rights card influence its public image?

Literature Review

The post-9/11 period has witnessed significant shifts in global security practices and the protection of civil liberties, particularly in the United States and its allied countries. In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, measures aimed at enhancing national security were swiftly implemented. However, while intended to protect citizens, these measures have faced widespread criticism for infringing upon essential civil liberties. Goderis and Versteeg (2012) emphasize that such infringements undermine the core principles of a strong welfare democracy, which relies on apparent power and institutional separations. The result has been a tense balance between maintaining security and upholding fundamental rights, raising concerns about the erosion of civil liberties in the name of counterterrorism.

One of the most significant impacts of post-9/11 actions has been the worsening of the economic and humanitarian conditions in countries affected by U.S. military interventions, especially Afghanistan. The U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, which was justified as part of the broader "War on Terror," not only exacerbated the region's already deteriorating situation but also intensified the vulnerability of the U.S. economy to external hostilities. Hussain (2022) suggests that this intervention, alongside the broader U.S. involvement in South Asia, has helped to fulfill the U.S.'s hegemonic agendas in the region, particularly concerning the geopolitical interests of China and Pakistan. The U.S. presence



in Afghanistan and strengthening Indo-U.S. relations are key concerns for China and Pakistan, further complicating the international landscape.

The evolution of global communication practices since the Gulf War has also played a crucial role in shaping the discourse surrounding the War on Terror. According to Feldman (2005), there has been a realignment of visual communication strategies used by states and media in areas such as political mobilization, identity formation, and public safety. Images of violence, terror, and social suffering have become prominent in popular culture, reflecting the increasing integration of these elements into the public consciousness. This shift in visual representation has significantly influenced public opinion, contributing to the justification of the erosion of civil liberties in the name of national security.

Crowson, DeBacker, and Thomas (2005) further argue that the complex interplay of security concerns and ideological orientations has shaped post-9/11 attitudes toward civil liberties. Their research hypothesizes that conventional dictatorship and social dominance orientation significantly influence American public opinion on military action in Iraq and civil liberties. Following the September 11 attacks, Americans faced a difficult challenge in balancing security concerns with the protection of individual rights, and this tension remains a central theme in discussions about post-9/11 policy.

Internationally, the U.S.-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq were justified not only by concerns over terrorism but also by the rhetoric of human rights protection. Kirchner (2004) notes that the global consensus following 9/11 was to combat terrorism, but the underlying human rights implications of these interventions were often overlooked. The conflict in Iraq, for instance, was framed as part of the larger war on terror. However, human rights concerns—such as the treatment of prisoners and the justification for military intervention—were central to the discourse.

The role of legality in shaping post-9/11 counterterrorism policies is another crucial area of debate. Sanders (2011) suggests that the U.S. government, in its efforts to combat terrorism, often bypassed legal frameworks through practices such as questionable detention, surveillance, and interrogation techniques. Adopting a 'State of exception' approach, wherein legality was subordinated to security concerns, has raised concerns about the erosion of fundamental rights. The U.S. government's endorsement of such practices, which often involved secretive and unaccountable actions, has been criticized for disregarding international norms and basic human rights protections.

Reitan (2003) analyzes the diminishing protection of civil liberties in U.S. foreign and domestic policy. His study traces the increasing trivialization of equal rights promotion in foreign relations and the intensifying discourse around policies that condone political executions, covert military tribunals, mass incarceration, and violations of the Geneva Convention. The use of torture during interrogations, along with the broader strategy of



mass detention, has become emblematic of the post-9/11 security landscape, signaling a profound shift in how the U.S. approaches both national and international human rights standards.

In sum, the literature surrounding the post-9/11 era highlights the complex relationship between national security and civil liberties. While the U.S. government's actions in the War on Terror were initially framed as necessary for protecting citizens from terrorism, these measures have had profound implications for human rights both within the U.S. and globally. The discourse surrounding the erosion of civil liberties, the justification of military interventions, and the legal and ethical ramifications of these actions continue to shape contemporary debates on security and human rights.

Research Methodology

This research paper employs a qualitative research methodology to critically examine the United States military interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks, within the framework of the global "War on Terror." The study utilizes secondary data sources, including scholarly books, research articles, reports from human rights organizations, government documents, and media coverage, particularly on literature from Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and Web of Science. These sources were carefully selected to conduct a comprehensive literature analysis, allowing for a thorough exploration of the justifications provided by the U.S. government for these military actions and an assessment of the human rights violations that occurred as a result. By critically analyzing the rhetoric of U.S. officials and contrasting it with the realities on the ground, the research aims to highlight the discrepancies between the U.S.'s professed commitment to human rights and the outcomes of its military interventions. The study seeks to contribute to a broader understanding of the complexities and contradictions inherent in American foreign policy during the post-9/11 period.

Discussion

U.S. Invasion of Afghanistan

Despite Afghanistan's lack of involvement in the September 11, 2001 attacks, it was the first country targeted by the United States in the aftermath. The U.S. accused the Afghan government of harboring Osama bin Laden, the mastermind behind the attacks. Bin Laden, who had been expelled from Sudan, allegedly sought refuge in Afghanistan. Following the attacks, the U.S. demanded that Afghanistan extradite Bin Laden, but Mullah Omar, the Taliban leader, refused. As a result, the U.S. determined to proceed with military action, citing Afghanistan's role as a sanctuary for terrorists and human rights violators. While this justification had some basis, understanding the broader context is essential (Alm, 2021).



In 1979, the USSR invaded Afghanistan, prompting the United States to provide substantial financial and military support to the Afghan resistance, which included Islamic militants. These militants, later known as the Taliban, played a key role in driving out the Soviet forces. After the Soviet withdrawal, the Taliban assumed control of Afghanistan, but their governance quickly became synonymous with extreme human rights abuses. The Taliban's harsh interpretation of Islamic law led to widespread human rights violations, including severe punishments for minor offenses. The U.S., having previously supported the resistance, is now confronted with the consequences of its past actions and the rise of a regime that violated its moral principles. As a proponent of universal human rights, the U.S. could not remain passive in the face of such abuses.

The U.S. rationale for intervening in Afghanistan was not limited to human rights concerns but also included the growing threat of Islamic radicalism spreading beyond Afghanistan's borders. By 2001, Afghanistan had become a hotbed for Islamic militants, whose ambitions extended beyond local terror. The increased globalization of communication and travel allowed these militants to spread their radical ideology worldwide, culminating in the September 11 attacks. The threat of global terrorism, combined with the possibility of neighboring countries like Pakistan and Iran falling under the influence of radical Islam, made it clear that Afghanistan's instability posed a global security risk. The U.S. intervention, from a liberal perspective, was seen as necessary to prevent further escalation and safeguard both regional and global security (Hilali, 2017).

However, realists view the U.S. invasion with more skepticism. The dissolution of the Soviet Union had eliminated the primary justification for the U.S. military presence in the region, and many argue that the invasion of Afghanistan was motivated by broader strategic interests. Realists contend that the U.S. sought to maintain its influence in the region, particularly given Afghanistan's significant oil resources, which could provide a new revenue stream and strategic advantage. Additionally, the attack on the Twin Towers had tarnished the image of the United States as the world's dominant superpower. The war on terror was partly an effort to restore its global stature and demonstrate its military and political might (Mazhar, Dehghannejad, & Faiyazanoush, 2024).

The U.S. response to the 9/11 attacks did not immediately result in a full-scale invasion. Instead, a few troops were deployed initially, with the conflict unfolding in three phases. The first phase aimed at overthrowing the Taliban government, while the second phase targeted the dismantling of Taliban-supported State institutions. Following the Taliban's defeat, the third phase focused on counterinsurgency operations (Malkasian, 2021).



Despite its stated commitment to combating terrorism and promoting human rights, the U.S. has faced numerous allegations of violating these principles during its military operations. Subsequent sections will explore these contradictions further. As we transition to the next theater of conflict, the complexities and challenges of the War on Terror continue to unfold (Muzaffar, Nawab, & Yaseen, 2021).

U.S. Invasion on Iraq

In March 2003, U.S. forces invaded Iraq, citing the need to eliminate Saddam Hussein's alleged weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and overthrow his authoritarian regime. Saddam Hussein, who had ruled Iraq for decades, was seen as an obstacle to U.S. objectives in the region. His regime, particularly after the failed invasion of Kuwait in 1990, faced intense international scrutiny. In response to Iraq's actions, the United Nations imposed economic sanctions and deployed personnel to monitor the country and identify any WMDs. By 2000, Saddam Hussein was refusing to allow U.N. inspectors into Iraq, raising global concerns about his potential acquisition of WMDs. After the 9/11 attacks, President George W. Bush further escalated these concerns, accusing Saddam of developing WMDs and supporting terrorist organizations. Bush argued that Saddam's regime, which he claimed was linked to Al-Qaeda, posed a significant threat that necessitated military action (Butt, 2019).

The United States also invoked human rights violations as part of its justification for the invasion. Weapons of mass destruction, as classified by the United Nations Human Rights Committee, violate the right to life, a fundamental human right. The possibility that Saddam Hussein possessed such weapons was framed as a global threat, not only to Iraqis but to the international community. Additionally, the U.S. accused Saddam of suppressing dissent and committing atrocities to maintain his grip on power, further bolstering the argument for intervention. The liberation of the Iraqi people from a brutal dictator was portrayed as a moral imperative for the U.S. government (Rayburn & Sobchak, 2019).

However, like the invasion of Afghanistan, the true motives behind the Iraq War are highly contested. Critics argue that the U.S. used human rights as a pretext to pursue its interests. One key factor is Saddam Hussein's increasingly anti-American stance, which provided an opportunity for the U.S. to eliminate a regional adversary. Furthermore, Iraq's vast oil reserves raised suspicions that the U.S. had ulterior economic motives. These concerns gained traction when high-ranking officials within the Bush administration, such as General John Abizaid (Ret.), acknowledged that oil was a significant factor in the decision to go to war (Pitney, 2008).

Another point of contention is the Bush administration's claims about Iraq's WMDs. In the months leading up to the invasion, the U.S. repeatedly asserted that it had concrete evidence of Saddam Hussein's weapons program, hoping to galvanize public support for the war. Secretary of State Colin Powell presented a vial of anthrax as purported



evidence of Iraq's WMD capabilities. However, this claim proved unsubstantiated, and the WMD issue became secondary after the invasion. Critics suggest that the U.S. shifted its focus to human rights violations as the central justification for the war, particularly as the absence of WMDs became increasingly evident. Senator Lincoln Chafee noted that the U.S. government had stopped emphasizing the WMD issue and instead shifted its rhetoric to human rights (Fisher, 2003). Human Rights Watch's Ken Roth also observed that many of the human rights violations in Iraq, including killings, were not new or particularly unusual and, therefore, did not justify the scale of intervention that the U.S. pursued (Human Rights Watch, 2004).

This shift suggests that human rights concerns were used as a strategic tool to garner public support and justify an invasion that many argue was motivated by geopolitical and economic interests. By framing the war as a moral crusade to liberate Iraqis from tyranny, the United States sought to legitimize its actions, even as the true motivations behind the conflict remained more complex and self-serving (Alyabis, 2021).

The U.S. Assault on Libya

Fellow citizens of the United States, it is important to note that the third and most recent invasion undertaken by the United States has provoked responses similar to those that followed previous military interventions. Many people turned to news channels as their primary source of information on the conflict. President Obama stated that the intervention was intended to save the lives of nonviolent protesters and protect their right to protest against the dictatorial regime of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya. Once again, global politics has returned to human rights as a central focus of American foreign policy (Blanchard, 2020).

In 2011, Libya appeared to be swept up in the "Arab Spring," an uprising that began in Benghazi and quickly spread to other cities. Gaddafi's forces responded to the protests with violent repression, prompting him to mobilize pro-regime supporters and promise to suppress the growing opposition. The situation appeared to be spiraling toward civil war. Anticipating that Gaddafi would use force against his people, the United States called for a United Nations session, which led to the passing of the U.N. Security Council Resolution 1973. This resolution authorized NATO to conduct Operation Unified Protector, which included the establishment of a no-fly zone over Libya and using force to protect civilians. NATO subsequently used this mandate to remove Gaddafi's government and effectively carry out a coup (Shay, 2019).

However, this position presents a key issue: Resolution 1973 did not explicitly call for airstrikes or regime change. Critics argue that the Libyan intervention was not a purely humanitarian effort, as the United States had claimed. This raises an important question: What prompted the U.S. to attack Libya? One possible answer is oil, a recurring factor in many of the U.S.'s foreign interventions. Furthermore, questions have been raised about



the role of the United Nations. Some critics argue that the U.S. used the U.N. to justify an invasion that violated the sovereignty of another nation. This paper contends that the U.N. has been ineffective, as it failed to hold NATO accountable for improperly implementing the resolution (Song, 2016).

In examining these significant conflicts and their justifications, we see a common thread: the United States has frequently employed human rights as a rationale to persuade the public of the necessity of war. However, once these conflicts began, the U.S. was often confronted with allegations of human rights abuses. The next section of this paper will explore some of these allegations in greater detail.

Human Rights Violations and the USA

A paper by Frost (2002), published by the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), explores how, after the September 11 attacks, the United States missed an opportunity for global cooperation in the fight against terrorism. Instead, the U.S. opted to spread fear and engage in terrorism under the guise of the "War on Terror." Frost argues that the United States squandered the chance to leverage people's global goodwill and kindness, choosing instead to deceive the world about its capacity to create a safer, better future. By prioritizing its interests, the U.S. accused other nations of human rights abuses while committing abuses that far exceeded those of the tyrannical regimes it criticized.

Turning first to Afghanistan, the United States launched its first major military operation in the post-2001 era. Afghanistan bore a heavy price for the American invasion. Many terrorist suspects were detained without the opportunity to exercise their right to defense, and their detention facilities were not subjected to inspections by the International Red Cross in violation of international law. Detainees faced unlawful imprisonment and denial of fundamental rights, and there were no trials to ensure accountability. Despite being criminally detained, these individuals retained inalienable rights that the United States disregarded.

In addition to wrongful detentions, the U.S. faced accusations of severe mistreatment of prisoners. One of the most notorious instances of abuse occurred at Bagram Air Base in 2002, where detainees were tortured, including one Afghan prisoner who was hanged and tortured until his death (Golden, 2005). Such instances were not isolated but part of a recurring pattern of abuse, with reports suggesting that some U.S. soldiers took pleasure in torture. In one notable case, a U.S. contractor fatally injured a detainee named Abdul Wali in 2003. While the media attention generated by the case led to the contractor's temporary imprisonment, the overall culture of torture persisted.

Beyond individual incidents, the U.S. military's treatment of civilians in Afghanistan also attracted widespread criticism. Even during wartime, international law prohibits attacks on civilians, and such actions are classified as war crimes. Nonetheless,



American forces continued to engage in such practices. In 2012, the "Kandahar massacre" resulted in the deaths of 16 civilians at the hands of U.S. soldiers (Healy, 2013). The killing of non-combatants during U.S. airstrikes, particularly in Afghanistan and western Pakistan, is another troubling aspect. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism (BIJ) revealed that U.S. aerial strikes have resulted in approximately 17,000 civilian deaths since 2002 (Kreps, 2022). Additionally, in 2015, a U.S. airstrike on a hospital in Kunduz killed over 40 civilians, an event widely recognized as a violation of international humanitarian law (Popalzai, 2015).

The U.S. also employed white phosphorus, a chemical weapon banned under international law due to its horrific effects. Despite its prohibited status, the U.S. used white phosphorus during battles in Iraq and Afghanistan, leading to numerous civilian casualties. This further underscores the hypocrisy of the United States, which justified its invasions based on its opposition to weapons of mass destruction while using such weapons in conflict zones.

Human rights abuses also emerged from Iraq, where U.S. forces frequently violated international laws and norms. In densely populated areas, American soldiers conducted indiscriminate assaults that led to civilian deaths. U.S. forces were accused of targeting non-combatants and medical personnel, arresting individuals without evidence, and detaining them without trial. These actions raise serious concerns about the U.S.'s respect for international law and human rights.

In both Afghanistan and Iraq, a pattern emerged in which the United States failed to adhere to the "Occupation Law" following the overthrow of these nations' governments. After dismantling the existing regimes, the U.S. did not ensure that essential services such as healthcare, food, and security remained accessible to the local populations. The subsequent instability and suffering in these countries can largely be attributed to the U.S.'s failure to fulfill its obligations as an occupying power.

The U.S.'s intervention in Libya in 2011 is the third case study explored in this paper. In Libya, NATO's actions, which were initially framed as a humanitarian intervention, quickly shifted towards regime change, undermining the sovereignty of the Libyan people. The civilian casualties resulting from the airstrikes in the initial months of the invasion were estimated to be in the thousands. Moreover, the U.S. and NATO failed to restore essential services after the removal of Gaddafi's regime, exacerbating the country's pre-existing socio-economic and political problems.

One of the often-overlooked consequences of U.S. military interventions is the destruction of cultural and historical heritage sites. According to the United Nations Human Rights Office, the destruction of cultural and religious sites constitutes a violation of human rights (OHCHR, 2016). Despite this, the U.S. and NATO forces did not take adequate measures to protect Libya's cultural heritage, which is deeply rooted in the history of the



region. For example, the bombing campaigns in Iraq, particularly in Baghdad, led to the destruction of centuries-old cultural and religious sites. The use of carpet bombing, especially in densely populated urban centers, caused extensive damage not only to the infrastructure but also to the cultural fabric of these nations. This destruction serves as a stark reminder of the devastating consequences of U.S. military actions, which are often framed as efforts to promote democracy and human rights.

In brief, the United States' interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, while justified under the pretext of promoting human rights and combating terrorism, have been marred by widespread violations of those very principles. The U.S. has faced numerous allegations of war crimes, including the mistreatment of prisoners, the killing of civilians, and the destruction of cultural heritage. These actions raise important questions about the true motivations behind U.S. foreign policy and the consistency of its commitment to human rights.

Effects on Public Insight

After the September 11 attacks, 83% of the U.S. population supported military involvement in Afghanistan, and 71% backed the invasion of Iraq. However, as the conflicts dragged on, public opinion began to shift, with many questioning the legitimacy of these decisions. By the following year, 69% of Americans believed the U.S. military had failed in Afghanistan, and 53% held the same view about Iraq (A Year Later Iraq Armed Conflict, 2020, May 31). The reaction to the Iraq War, in particular, was striking. While the U.S. achieved some of its strategic objectives in the region, the war was still seen as a failure. The conflict had been framed as a response to human rights abuses. However, the situation in Iraq did not improve significantly after the invasion, raising doubts about the effectiveness of the intervention. This underscores the importance of meeting the obligations tied to human rights when using them as justification for military action. People genuinely care about human rights, and failure to improve conditions undermines the moral argument for intervention.

One of the unintended consequences of the U.S.'s post-9/11 rhetoric has been the rise of Islamophobia. The ongoing conflicts in Muslim-majority countries have led to a growing association between Islam and hostility, with the perception of Islam as linked to human rights violations increasing (Hartig, 2021). The Taliban's approach to human rights was often conflated with the broader Islamic worldview, and the emergence of Islamist jihadist groups further worsened the treatment of Muslims and Islam. This negative perception has fueled alienation, exacerbating tensions between the West and Muslim communities.

The marginalization of Muslims, however, has also given rise to a renewed sense of solidarity and resistance within these communities. Groups affected by American policies have historically mobilized in defense of their rights, often in opposition to the



strategies of fear and militarism employed in the "War on Terror." For example, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) denounced the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, and groups like the Afghan Peace Volunteers advocated for food security and opposed the use of drones. Muslim-led resistance movements have made significant strides, challenging the U.S. narrative of intervention and asserting their right to self-determination.

Perhaps the most profound consequence of the global War on Terror has been the erosion of the United States' credibility. The repeated use of human rights abuses as a pretext for military intervention has led to skepticism about America's genuine commitment to protecting human rights. Non-Americans are increasingly scrutinizing the rhetoric of the United States, and public opinion of U.S. foreign policy has soured in many parts of the world. This shift is particularly evident in predominantly Muslim regions. In Egypt, for instance, 85% of the population views American foreign policy negatively. This negative perception is rooted in the irony that America's attacks on Muslim-majority countries have provided Islamist groups with a compelling narrative of victimization, which they have skillfully used to garner support.

Furthermore, many in the East now perceive American efforts to promote human rights as attempts to impose a Western, liberal understanding of those rights rather than a genuine commitment to global human dignity. The American war on terror has significantly damaged the liberal perspective on human rights and liberty, contributing to a growing divide between the West and much of the rest of the world. As a result, the U.S.'s credibility in advocating for human rights globally has been severely undermined.

Conclusion

The events of September 11, 2001 remain one of the world's most catastrophic occurrences, as it marked an unprecedented act of terrorism. The United States' immediate declaration of a global war on terror serves as the starting point for this paper, as it profoundly shaped global dynamics over the following two decades. However, how successful has the War on Terror been?

On the one hand, the neutralization of many key terrorist leaders, including Osama bin Laden, has undeniably contributed to maintaining some degree of international peace. The death of bin Laden in 2011 offered a moment of relief for the world and can be seen as a significant achievement of the War on Terror. This success also highlighted the dangers of extremism, prompting nations worldwide to recognize and address the growing threat. The U.S. declaration of war against terrorism underscored the severity of the crisis and galvanized international support for counterterrorism efforts and the promotion of human rights.

However, the War on Terror can also be seen as a failure. Estimates suggest that



the conflict has led to the deaths of around one million people, many of whom were innocent civilians with no involvement in the hostilities. This death toll is 3,000 times greater than the number of victims of the 9/11 attacks. The immense human cost of the war raises profound ethical questions about its justification. Moreover, the war has undermined the concept of moral universalism, as doubts persist regarding the true intentions of certain countries involved in the campaign for human rights.

As the principal theaters of the War on Terror close, a critical question emerges: "What follows?" An issue as complex as this, which has engaged the world for two decades, cannot be resolved overnight. What steps should all involved parties take to mitigate the damage caused by the conflict?

Having spent two decades in the region, the United States is likely to turn its attention elsewhere, particularly with the rise of China in Asia. However, the U.S. cannot simply abandon the regions it has affected for so long. To ensure proper recovery, sustained economic aid is essential to rebuild the war-torn areas.

Nations affected by the conflict must focus on physical and economic reconstruction, prioritizing improving living standards for their populations and ensuring access to fundamental human rights, such as healthcare and education. Before achieving this, however, they will face a significant challenge: the deep divisions and polarization resulting from years of conflict.

To overcome these obstacles, these nations must work to heal their internal divisions by focusing on shared cultural identity and values. Governments are responsible for supporting these nations' reconstruction to the fullest extent possible. International organizations, such as the United Nations, UNICEF, WHO, and other NGOs, must be involved in managing the humanitarian crises in these regions. To prevent further negative consequences, affected countries should expedite their post-war recovery processes, which will require substantial international cooperation.

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