

War on Terror

The "War on Terror" is a nebulous term used by the George W. Bush administration that referred to the ideological struggle waged between the United States and its allies (the Coalition), and those organizations and states believed by the United States to be actively engaged in committing or sponsoring acts of terrorism. The most well-known of these groups is the Al Qaeda terrorist network, which has sought to eliminate Western influence throughout the Muslim world and replace governments in Muslim countries with Islamic theocracies. Although the United States has actively sought to neutralize Islamic terrorist groups for almost three decades, it is generally accepted that the War on Terror began with the Al Qaeda sponsored attacks on New York and Washington, D.C., on September 11, 2001.



In traditional wars, the military forces of one state actor are engaged in combat with the forces of another state, and often a formal declaration of war is exchanged between the two. Conflicts of this type end when either side surrenders its forces, an armistice is negotiated, or the forces of one of the two combatants is successful in capturing the capital of the other, effectively eliminating the enemy government and its military leadership. The War on Terror has been viewed as fundamentally different in the sense that "terrorism" is not a state or other organization, but rather a method of conflict. For this reason, the War on Terror has been considered a global struggle as organizations opposed to Western influence are spread across the world, difficult to locate, and use unconventional methods of attack to wage battle. Many analysts therefore have asserted that the War on Terror may last for a generation or more, and become the defining theme of international relations throughout the 21st century.

Following the September 11, 2001, attack on the United States, President George W. Bush launched a U.S. counter-offensive by attacking the Taliban government of Afghanistan, known to be providing safe-harbor to Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and other terrorists. The Taliban regime quickly fell, but bin Laden and his associates were successful in avoiding capture by Coalition forces; bin Laden remained at large until 2011, when he was killed in a raid by U.S. forces at the compound where he was hiding in Pakistan. After the invasion of Afghanistan, President Bush articulated his vision for an expansion of the War on Terror in his 2002 State of the Union Address. In his speech the president declared that Iraq, Iran, and North Korea, "constituted an axis of evil," in part for their open hostility to U.S. interests, and suspicion that they were in the process of developing nuclear weapons. Believing that Iraq, led by Saddam Hussein, was close to acquiring weapons of mass destruction, and convincing the American people that Iraq played a role in the September 11 attacks, Bush received authorization from Congress to invade Iraq in 2003. Hussein's regime was quickly defeated and Hussein captured later that year, but no evidence of either Iraqi weapons of mass destruction or involvement in the 9/11 attacks were ever found. In testament to the difficulties in waging this war, U.S. forces remain in Afghanistan and, on a limited basis, Iraq.

The War on Terror has also been viewed by others as a rhetorical device used by the Bush administration to incite fear among Americans and to justify its nation-building projects overseas, violations of terrorist suspect's human rights, and infringements on civil liberties at home. Under Bush, White House officials invoked the threat of terrorism as it sought support for invading Iraq, using harsh interrogation methods, indefinitely holding terrorist suspects, and passage of the USA PATRIOT Act.

Three days after assuming the presidency in 2009, Barack Obama issued executive orders to ban coercive

interrogation techniques previously used by the Central Intelligence Agency, to create new policies regarding terrorist suspects, and to close the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay. A month later, the president announced a plan to withdraw all combat troops from Iraq by August 2010. Though terrorism continues to be considered a serious global danger, these reversals of Bush's policies have caused many pundits to suggest that the provisions set by the Obama administration have effectively ended the state-sanctioned "War on Terror." While the Obama White House has often used "overseas contingency operations" to replace references to the "global war on terror," the term continues to be used by many who still view the pursuit of terrorism as a fundamental ideological struggle.

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Further Reading

Duffy, Helen. *The "War on Terror" and the Framework of International Law*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. ; Hoge, James, and Gideon Rose, eds. *Understanding the War on Terror*. New York: Foreign Affairs, 2005; Lustick, Ian S. *Trapped in the War on Terror*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006.

Select Citation Style:

MLA

Peters, Gerhard. "War on Terror." *Issues: Understanding Controversy and Society*. ABC-CLIO, 2014. Web. 15 Sept. 2014.

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