

WAR ON TERROR

IMPACT: The Global War on Terror (GWOt) is an international military campaign launched by the United States under President George W. Bush following the September 11th, 2001 attacks by Al-Qaeda. Dubbed the 'Forever Wars,' this conflict is a borderless and timeless campaign that has touched nearly 40 percent of the world, cost the United States an estimated \$8 trillion, and has killed more than 900,000 people (although the actual death toll is likely to be much higher). The WoT discourse amplified Islamophobia as it dehumanized Muslims by tying them terrorism and constructing them as 'inherently violent' and a threat. Along with formal military warfare, the WoT has also comprised of large-scale surveillance measures in the U.S, torture, global drone strikes, blacksites, and the Guantanamo Bay military prison.

- A few days after the deadly September 11th, 2001 attacks by Al-Qaeda that killed over 3,000 Americans, President George W. Bush delivered a speech to the country. **During remarks on September 16, 2001, Bush used the term “war on terrorism,” stating “This is a new kind of -- a new kind of evil. And we understand. And the American people are beginning to understand. This crusade, this war on terrorism is going to take a while. And the American people must be patient.”**
- On **September 18, 2001, Congress passed the Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) with near unanimous approval (only one member of Congress, Barbara Lee, opposed the bill).** This joint resolution authorized the use of the United States Armed Forces against those responsible for the September 11 attacks. **A 2019 piece by Human Rights First noted that due to the “lack of specificity and other safeguards, such as an expiration date,” in the AUMF, “successive administrations from both parties [have] stretch[ed] and expand[ed] the authorization far beyond what Congress originally envisioned.”** Over the course of nearly two decades, the 2001 AUMF has been invoked “for a broad range of military operations in at least 14 countries and against more than half a dozen organizations.”
- On **September 20th, 2001, during a formal speech to Congress, President Bush stated “Our war on terror begins with al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated.”** During this speech, the U.S. President addressed “Muslims throughout the world,” stating “We respect your faith... Its teachings are good and peaceful, and those who commit evil in the name of Allah blaspheme the name of Allah. The terrorists are traitors to their own faith, trying, in effect, to hijack Islam itself.” **Bush went on to exclaim, “The enemy of America is not our many Muslim friends. It is not our many Arab friends. Our enemy is a radical network of terrorists and every government that supports them.”**
- Critics of the War on Terror (WoT) have noted that the terminology is inaccurate given “terror” is not an identifiable enemy (much like the criticism in response to the “War on Drugs”). Additionally, **the enemy was defined by President Bush as a “network of terrorists” and any government that supported them, meaning this vague wording laid the groundwork for a timeless and borderless war.** In an August 2017 piece for The Nation, Rebecca Gordon noted that “in a real war, nations or organized non-state actors square off against each other. A metaphorical war is like a real war...but the enemy isn’t a country or even a single group of Islamic jihadists. It’s some other kind of threat: a disease, a social problem, or, in the case of the war on terror, an emotion.” Metaphorical wars have been waged by leading figures in the U.S. government, including the “War on Crime,” by J. Edgar Hoover and the “War on Drugs” by President Richard Nixon. While they are metaphorical in terms, **Gordon notes these wars have killed and are “killing real people in real numbers...When we declare war on phenomena like crime, drugs, or**

terror, instantly militarizing such problems, we severely limit our means for understanding and dealing with them.”

- The **War on Terror has included the U.S.’s military campaign in Afghanistan as well as the invasion of Iraq in 2003.** Additionally, it also **involves the use of drones in carrying out attacks in a variety of countries (including Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen) where a formal war has not been declared.** In addition to military campaigns around the globe, the U.S. also carried out a number of policies in the name of the “War on Terror” including surveillance of Muslim communities in the United States, which many human rights experts noted violated individuals’ civil rights and liberties.
- In the months after 9/11, **President Bush launched the Terrorist Surveillance Program (TSP), which authorized the National Security Agency (“NSA”) to intercept phone calls and emails traveling into and out of the United States.** A 2005 New York Times piece noted that the NSA “monitored the international telephone calls and international e-mail messages of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people inside the United States...[all] without the court-approved warrants ordinarily required for domestic spying.” In January 2007, then-Attorney General Alberto Gonzales wrote a letter informing U.S. Senators that President Bush would not be reauthorizing the TSP, but “any electronic surveillance that was occurring as part of the Terrorist Surveillance Program will now be conducted subject to the approval of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court.” A June 2013 piece by the Washington Post revealed that TSP had been replaced with PRISM, which involves the NSA and the FBI “tapping directly into the central servers of nine leading U.S. Internet companies, extracting audio and video chats, photographs, e-mails, documents, and connection logs that enable analysts to track foreign targets.” **A 2014 piece in the *Intercept* found that as a result of this surveillance “NSA and FBI ha[d] covertly monitored the emails of prominent Muslim-Americans—including a political candidate and several civil rights activists, academics, and lawyers.”**
- An **April 2015 piece in *USA Today* noted that the “massive phone surveillance system the NSA launched to identify terrorists after the Sept. 11 attacks,” was built on the existing model of surveillance under the “War on drugs” established a decade before 9/11. The report found that “for more than two decades, the Justice Department and the Drug Enforcement Administration amassed logs of virtually all telephone calls from the USA to as many as 116 countries linked to drug trafficking.” This model served as the foundation for the NSA, which President Bush authorized to gather its own logs of Americans’ phone calls in 2001.**
- **Counterterrorism operations became an outgrowth of the War on Terror,** as noted in reports by the Costs of War project at Boston University. These operations include “air and drone strikes, on-the-ground combat, so-called ‘Section 127e’ programs in which U.S. special operations forces plan and control partner force missions, military exercises in preparation for or as part of counterterrorism missions, and operations to train and assist foreign forces.” In a 2021 paper, the project found that **between 2018 to 2020, the United States government undertook what it labeled “counterterrorism” activities in 85 countries, noting that “these activities have often intensified local conflicts and contributed to authoritarianism and illicit profiteering.”** In her 2022 book, *Innocent Until Proven Muslim: Islamophobia, the War on Terror, and the Muslim Experience Since 9/11*, **Dr. Maha Hilal notes that the War on Terror has touched nearly 40 percent of the world.**
- A **2021 report by Brown University’s Cost of War project, found that “20 years of post-9/11 wars have cost the U.S. an estimated \$8 trillion and have killed more than 900,000 people.”** The co-founder of the project and professor of political science at Brown University, Neta Crawford, noted that

“The deaths we tallied are likely a vast undercount of the true toll these wars have taken on human life. It’s critical we properly account for the vast and varied consequences of the many U.S. wars and counterterror operations since 9/11, as we pause and reflect on all of the lives lost.” In a **September 2021 report, the Cost of War project estimated at least 37 million “people have fled their homes in the eight most violent wars the U.S. military has launched or participated in since 2001.”** In a 2023 journal article for the NYU Review of Law & Social Change, Azadeh Shahshahani and Divya Babbula, concluded that “the Global War on Terror has caused lasting harm to individuals, communities, natural resources, infrastructure, and the economies of targeted countries.”

- In October 2021, thirty international scholars provided an assessment of the impact of the War on Terror on Muslim communities, specifically looking at the “counterterrorism” apparatus and its policies and tactics. The report examined the various dimensions of the US-led War on Terror, and had individual essays analyzing the “restructuring of the national security and surveillance state; the use of torture, rendition, black sites, Guantanamo Bay prison, and drone warfare; Countering Violent Extremism programs; the destruction of Muslim civil liberties through the policies of infiltration, entrapment, and manufacturing crime; and further repression of American Muslims through the use of “terrorism” sentencing enhancement and discriminatory prison conditions.” It “calls for communities to organize and mobilize against the policies of the Global War on Terror,” and provides a list of policy recommendations including “ending the Authorization of Use of Military Force (AUMF) to the full or partial repeal of the USA PATRIOT Act.”
- **Coinciding with the War on Terror was the development of a discourse that constructed Islam as a religion tied to terrorism, and equated Muslims to “terrorists.”** In the October 2021 report, **Professor Lisa Stampnitzky detailed how the discipline of terrorism itself is highly politicized, outlining how there is no agreed upon definition of the word,** and that “although ‘terrorism; is often defined as political violence against civilians, in practice, it is not consistently applied as such, in large part because each of these terms (political, violence, civilian) are quite malleable.” She wrote that “studies have also consistently found that whether an incident is classed as terrorism is significantly impacted by the perceived identity of the perpetrator.” In concluding her study, **Professor Stampnitzky stated that there is a “racialized understanding of terrorism,” and “this has the effect of both producing racist equations of Arabs and Muslims with “terrorism”, along with the framing of these groups as “suspect communities” and subjects them to various forms of harassment and deprivation of rights.”**
- **Dr. Maha Hilal, in her book, *Innocent Until Proven Muslim*, argues that the official narrative of the war has “justified the creation of a sprawling apparatus of state violence that is rooted in Islamophobia.”**

Drone wars

- One aspect of the War on Terror abroad has been the use of drone strikes. **Under the Bush administration, the United States adopted the use of drones as a method in its global war.** This tactic was **vastly expanded under the administration of President Barack Obama, who described the US’s drone program as “precise, precision strikes against al-Qaida and their affiliates.”** During his presidency, **Obama had weekly meetings called “terror Tuesdays,” with his head of CIA where they would go through a “kill list” and choose which individuals to kill via drone strikes.** As Dr. Maha Hilal notes in her book, **the use of drone strikes has been shrouded in secrecy as there are no transparency or accountability measures in place.** In a piece for the The Conversation, senior lecturer

at Birmingham City University, Lily Hamourtziadou, states that the aim of drone strikes is “to kill not capture,” and that in this scenario, “Human beings are denied the right to surrender and are instead executed for being members of a group defined by the killers as evil.” She further states that **“those executed are presumed “guilty”, without arrest, questioning or subsequent conviction. Targeted killing becomes normalized, leading to increasing human rights abuses.”** The precise number of casualties from drone strikes remains unknown given government secrecy around the program, but a **September 2021 report from Airwars found that the US has carried out at least 91,340 strikes across seven major conflict zones** (Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Pakistan, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen), **which have killed anywhere between 22,679 and 48,308 civilians.**

The WoT at home

- Domestically, the **War on Terror has involved the criminalization of immigration and singling out Muslims for special treatment.** In her book, Dr. Maha Hilal notes that a number of programs were put into place following 9/11, which specifically targeted Muslims, such as the Alien Absconder initiative in January 2002, and National Security Entry-Exit Registration System (NSEERs), which targeted 25 countries, 24 of which were Muslim-majority. Additionally, following the deadly attacks on September 11th, the authorities carried out “special-interest detentions, which included the rounding up of hundreds of non-citizen immigrants, primarily Muslim men, who were then held in harsh conditions in Brooklyn, NY. The men were never charged but detained as “terrorism suspects.”
- In regards to **domestic surveillance measures, the FBI produced a Terrorism Screening Database (from the Terrorist Screening Center) in 2003, which by 2017 included 1.2 million people.** There was no transparency around the list or the process by which the government identified how individuals got on there. **A 2019 piece in *The Intercept* noted that the “government was routinely affixing the word ‘terrorist’ to an individual’s name and disseminating that information to a sprawling network of foreign and private partners, with virtually no evidence required to support the claim.”** From this list, came other lists such as the No-Fly list, containing identifying information of millions of “known or suspected terrorists,” which included children. There is **no transparency regarding how or why people are added to the list and there is no process for individuals to request their names be removed.** Most individuals don’t even know they are on the list, only discovering it when arriving at an airport where they are either barred from traveling or have to “undergo extensive, humiliating security measures.” There have been numerous court cases regarding the constitutionality of the list, including a 2015 ruling by a federal judge that found “that the government’s lack of effective procedures for people to challenge their inclusion on the controversial list was unconstitutional.” A lawsuit in 2014 by four Muslim Americans argued that the FBI placed them on the list “either to intimidate them into becoming informants or to retaliate against them for declining.” **In a 2023 report, the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) found that “more than 98 percent of the individuals on the watchlist are Muslims, with the No-Fly List being over 99 percent Muslim.”**
- Additionally, the post-9/11 period witnessed an increase in government surveillance of American Muslim communities. **One such example was the New York Police Department’s (NYPD) Muslim Surveillance and Mapping Program, which mapped, monitored, and profiled Muslim communities in New York City and neighboring states between 2001-2014.** A unit within the program sent informants into mosques, Muslim student groups, and Muslim-owned businesses to gather information on 28 “ancestries of interest.” The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) described the surveillance program as “based on a false and unconstitutional premise: that Muslim religious belief and practices are a basis for law enforcement scrutiny.” **The NYPD itself admitted that the surveillance failed to produce a single intelligence lead.** In April 2018, the NYPD settled a lawsuit with the Muslim

community, confirming that it had dismantled the “demographic unit” responsible for the spying and agreed that “it would not engage in religious-based surveillance in the future in New Jersey, as it had already accepted for New York.”

- The **WoT also involved the use of informants and undercover agents in terrorism cases.** In a 2020 Columbia Human Rights Law Review article, attorney Collin Poirot noted that following 9/11 “the FBI shifted from being an agency that investigated past or ongoing crimes to one focused on proactively gathering information to prevent future crimes,” and that the federal agency expanded “the strategies of surveillance and entrapment that it had honed during the Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) era.” In the piece, **Poirot describes the FBI’s post-9/11 “machinery of surveillance, entrapment, and prosecution,” as an “infrastructure built to repress Muslim Americans and Arab Americans.”** In his 2014 book, The Terror Factory: Inside the FBI’s Manufactured War on Terrorism, **journalist Trevor Aaronson uncovered and described how the FBI “built a network of informants whose primary purpose is to infiltrate Muslim communities to create phony terrorist plots so the bureau can claim victory in the War on Terror.”** Aaronson reviewed terrorism prosecutions between 2001-2014 and found that at least fifty defendants were on trial for conduct spurred by a paid FBI informant: “someone who provided not only the plan but also the means and opportunity for the terrorist plot.” Some post-9/11 entrapment cases targeting American Muslims include the Liberty City Seven (2006), Fort Dix 5 (2007), The Newburgh Four (2009), the case Rezwan Ferdaus (2011), and the case of Ayyub Abdul-Alim (2011).
- In 2014, Human Rights Watch and Columbia Law School’s Human Rights Institute found that the US Justice Department and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) targeted American Muslims in abusive counterterrorism “sting operations” based on religious and ethnic identity. In a 2023 Georgetown Law Journal article, Professor Sahar Aziz “empirically explored the extent to which terrorism related prosecutions are racialized, to the disadvantage of Muslim defendants.” She examined a database of “646 federal terrorism-related cases brought against Muslims between 2001 and 2021,” and found that “religious and dissident Muslims who have engaged in extremist speech but who have not engaged in violence without government ensnarement” are criminalized meanwhile “far-right supremacist groups are simultaneously granted license to plan politically motivated violence, culminating in a siege on the U.S. Capitol.”

Torture

- **Torture has become a hallmark of the War on Terror.** In 2014, the US Senate Select Subcommittee on Intelligence released its report on the CIA’s interrogation and detention programs launched in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. **The CIA Torture Report, as it’s also come to be known as, studied the CIA’s detention program, including looking at the secret black sites and prisons around the world, as well as the prison at Guantanamo Bay.** The report detailed the interrogation methods used by CIA officials and and “rejected many of the agency’s claims on the effectiveness of harsh interrogation techniques.” Some of the **key findings from the report of the interrogations included, “not an effective means of acquiring intelligence,” “brutal and far worse than the CIA represented,” “conditions of confinement for CIA detainees were harsher,” and “damaged the United States’ standing in the world.”** The Senate investigation into the tactics used by the CIA on suspects also revealed that CIA medical personnel “voiced alarm that waterboarding methods had deteriorated to ‘a series of near drownings’ and that agency employees subjected detainees to ‘rectal rehydration’ [rape] and other painful procedures that were never approved.” In 2019, Abu Zubaydah, the first person to be subject to the interrogation program approved by President George W. Bush’s administration, drew illustrations to describe the torture he was subjected to for the four years he was held in secret prisons by the CIA. **Zubaydah, who has been imprisoned for 21 years without charge and remains at Guantanamo**

Bay, chronicled his experience of waterboarding, stress positions, walling, confinement, violence, and sleep deprivation. In 2023, Abu Zubaydah, created another series of 40 drawings documenting the torture he experienced at black sites and at the prison at Guantanamo Bay, which were incorporated in a [report](#) on torture by US authorities published by the Center for Policy and Research at Seton Hall University law school. **Other large-scale events of torture in the WoT included the 2004 leaked images that revealed the horrific levels of abuse US military personnel carried out on Iraqi detainees at Abu Ghraib prison during the war in Iraq.**

- The **prison at Guantanamo Bay was opened in 2002 to detain individuals suspected of terrorism, and became the “site of egregious and ongoing human rights violations perpetrated by the United States government.”** Torture was present at the prison, where the vast majority of the detainees were never charged with a crime. The Bridge Initiative has published an extensive amount of research on the prison, including our [Guantanamo Bay data project](#), as well as factsheets addressing [torture](#), [the human cost](#), [legal challenges](#), and the [history](#) of the prison at the naval base. **All of the individuals who were/are detained at the prison are Muslim and there are documented accounts of islamophobic actions from military officials, including desecration of the Qur’an and violation of individual’s religious beliefs.** In 2023 for the first time in 21 years, the US [allowed](#) a United Nations special rapporteur to visit the detention center and meet with detainees. **In her report, special rapporteur Fionnuala Ní Aoláin found that “the legacy of torture and arbitrary detention combined with the current structural conditions at Guantanamo constitute ‘cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment’ and ‘may also meet the legal threshold for torture.’”** In an July 2023 [interview](#) with the Guardian, Ní Aoláin [said](#), “Without exception, each individual I met exhibits medical conditions relating to the physical harm they experienced from rendition and torture, or profound psychological distress such as anxiety, depression, extreme trauma and suicidal ideation,” and stated the “US had a responsibility to redress the harms it inflicted on its Muslim torture victims.”

Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) programs

- Another component of the domestic WoT is **Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) programming, which was launched in 2011 by the Obama administration.** The programming was [influenced](#) by the UK’s “Prevent” strategy, which has been [criticized](#) as “flawed,” “counterproductive,” and creating “a serious risk of human rights violations.” **CVE programs are based on false premises that end up targeting American Muslims and stigmatizing the community as inherently suspect.** For a full overview of CVE programs, check out the [Bridge Initiative factsheet](#).
- **Many academics and experts have noted how the vagueness of what constitutes “extreme” can be used by those in power to clampdown on dissent.** One example of this was the **FBI’s declaration of “Black Identity Extremists” in August 2017 during the Trump administration.** This occurred at a time when there was growing concern over whether the administration was [downplaying](#) the threat posed by white supremacist groups, and the report was released just nine days before the deadly [white supremacist rally](#) in Charlottesville, VA. The report seemed to be in response to the growing grassroots led protests against police brutality targeting black Americans. In its report, the FBI [stated](#) “it is very likely Black Identity Extremist (BIE) perceptions of police brutality against African Americans spurred an increase in premeditated, retaliatory lethal violence against law enforcement.” **In a November 2017 New York Times piece, law professors Khaled Beydoun and Justin Hansford wrote that “entirely nonviolent black activists face violations of their civil liberties and even violence if they’re deemed part of B.I.E,”** and warned that the label could “chill and criminalize a wide array of nonviolent activism in ways that have terrifying echoes its infamous COINTELPRO [program](#).” The legal experts further noted that the “F.B.I. designation compounds the vulnerability of black Muslims, who make up the

largest segment — at least 25 percent — of the Muslim population in the United States. Muslim communities are already the targets of counter-radicalization policing.”

Latest Developments in the WoT

- In **August 2021, President Joe Biden announced the formal end of the 20 years of war in Afghanistan — the longest war in American history.** When the US first invaded Afghanistan, one of the goals was to remove the Taliban regime, which the US accused of harboring Al-Qaeda and its leader Osama Bin Laden. **After President Biden announced the end of the US’s formal involvement in Afghanistan, the Taliban returned to power in the country.** Despite this announcement to cease large-scale ground operations in Afghanistan, a March 2022 piece in Just Security noted that “the Biden administration has made clear it remains poised to increase “over-the-horizon” operations in the form of drone strikes and special operations raids.” The authors stated that **in the last few years, the US troops had engaged in counterterrorism-related activities in at least 85 countries, and had a combat role in at least eight countries.** One of the most recurrent criticisms regarding the US-led War on Terror has been the vagueness surrounding it (i.e. its timeless and borderless nature) and that the military campaigns across the globe have often taken place in secret and “outside the realm of public debate.”

Bridge Initiative