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## SIXTEEN YEARS AFTER 9/11

### Bottom Line Up Front:

- On September 11, 2001, 2,978 people were murdered in what is still the worst terror attack in history.
- The repercussions of the attacks are still reverberating across the globe in the form of counterterrorism policies and geopolitical trends.
- Al-Qaeda is stronger now than in 2001, but so are the security and intelligence forces trying to prevent their attacks.
- The conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen remain the largest incubators of terrorism, and their citizens pay the heaviest price.

**The September 11, 2001 attacks were the most filmed and photographed murders in history.** The deaths of 2,978 people (not counting the 19 hijackers) were broadcast live and then repeated countless times, as al-Qaeda pulled off what they themselves called ‘the spectacular’—the most deadly and spectacular terrorist attack in history. The 16 years since [September 11](#) have seen many attempts at variations on that theme: al-Qaeda or another group such as the so-called Islamic State trying for another ‘Spectacular’ while security and intelligence services around the globe work to prevent it. There have been devastating terrorist attacks—Madrid, [Beslan](#), [Paris](#), [Orlando](#), [Nice](#), [Baghdad](#), [Istanbul](#)—but nothing on the scale of the morning that saw two of the world’s tallest skyscrapers brought down and the Pentagon left in flames.

There have been two significant and negative evolutions in the counterterrorism struggle in the years since September 11. The first involves an over-reliance on using military force to defeat endemic terrorism. The second is the reversing of the definition of what it means to be a spectacular terrorist attack. Each development feeds off the other. The result is that terrorism remains a primary concern for

Americans far above its actual threat to their wellbeing. Meanwhile, terrorism remains an all-too-real-threat in countries where terrorist groups may be as strong as the military forces that oppose them, and the only government, if any, is abysmal. The December 2001 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan was intended to destroy al-Qaeda and prevent that country from ever again providing a sanctuary for terrorism. That effort has both succeeded and failed depending on how the statement is framed. Using the world's most powerful military to fight a scattered and fleeing terrorist group evolved into a 16-year effort to build a country dominated by a central government, over the objections of history and geopolitics. The U.S. surprised al-Qaeda with how quickly and massively it went into Afghanistan; the U.S. is now struggling with an open-ended commitment in Afghanistan that is among the costliest in its history. The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, among the worst foreign policy decisions in U.S. history, led to the creation of al-Qaeda in Iraq and its successor, the Islamic State, and continues to drive conflict and chaos. Massive local and regional forces, including poor or tyrannical governments and inflamed sectarian groups, help sustain and fuel these conflicts. The U.S. response has been to increase its military presence and operations in both countries it invaded—as well as Syria - with the stated goal of fighting terrorism.

The second evolution has been a flipping of the definition of what constitutes a true 'terror spectacular.' In the early years after 2001, al-Qaeda tried and failed to execute another 'spectacular'; that failure is a significant accomplishment by countless security and intelligence agencies around the world, often working in liaison with each other. Yet the Islamic State—and before them, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)—evolved, calling for terror attacks of any kind, using anything as a weapon, from knives to hammers; from Twitter to trucks. The term 'spectacular' no longer applied to the manner, scale, and complexity of an attack but rather to public reactions to the attack. Any attack was deemed a massive success if it met two conditions: if it was immediately known to be a terrorist attack, and immediately feared to have been tied to the Islamic State. These low-scale high-impact attacks drove fears of terrorism in the U.S. to heights not seen since the days immediately after September 11.

The result in the U.S has been a rise in the fear of terrorism, and a skewing of policies—foreign and domestic—in response to that fear. The characterization or accusation that some people, politicians, or organizations were still living in a September 10, 2001 world or mindset has now given way to a mindset that every day is September 12, 2001; with the ever-present fear of waiting for the next attack. The counterterrorism challenge in 2017 remains what it was in 2001: to match perception with reality, and to create and execute strategic policies that minimize the very real threats posed by terrorism while avoiding tactics that create more problems than they solve.

The Soufan Center is a nonprofit organization dedicated to serving as a resource and forum for research, analysis, and strategic dialogue related to global security issues and emergent threats. For more information on TSC, please inquire at [info@thesoufancenter.org](mailto:info@thesoufancenter.org)



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