

20 Years after 9/11: US Counterterrorism has Seen Successes, but Major Groups Remain Undeclared



Featuring Katherine Zimmerman

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We're nearing the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the start of the war in Afghanistan. Following the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, the Taliban have seized control of the country, and the US-backed government has collapsed. Meanwhile, Turkey, Russia, China, and other powers remaining in the region are openly jostling for influence in the vacuum left by US forces. Katherine Zimmerman, a Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, has followed US counterterrorism issues and the war in Afghanistan closely. On this episode of Overwatch, she discusses the state of US counterterrorism efforts and American involvement in Afghanistan

Jacob Taylor:

This is Overwatch, a podcast presented by the Institute for the Study of War.

I'm Jacob Taylor. We're nearing the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the start of the war in Afghanistan. Following the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, the Taliban have seized control of most of the country and the US-backed government has essentially collapsed. Meanwhile, Turkey, Russia, China, and other powers remaining in the region are openly jostling for influence in the vacuum left by US forces.

Katherine Zimmerman, a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, has been a close observer of counter-terrorism issues and the war in Afghanistan. She's with me today to discuss the state of US counter-terrorism efforts and American involvement in Afghanistan. Katherine, thank you for being with us today.

Katherine Zimmerman:

Thanks for having me.

Jacob Taylor:

In mid-August, we saw the Afghan government essentially collapse, and the Taliban take control of the country. Have the Taliban won in Afghanistan?

Katherine Zimmerman:

The Taliban certainly feel as though they've won. They've always painted themselves as a government in exile, as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, simply not in power, and now they are bringing that government back to power. They've talked about a strategy that will outlast the American forces. And at this point, they have outlasted them. What it proves is that their strategy works and that the Taliban will not really face opposition inside of Afghanistan to their vision for its future.

Jacob Taylor:

One thing that's been circulating recently is the idea that the Taliban ideology and methodology might've changed a little bit over the last two decades. Are the Taliban of today more moderate now than they were when the US ousted them in 2001?

Katherine Zimmerman:

The Taliban are certainly casting themselves as more moderate than they were in 2001. But when we look at the top leadership, nearly all of those individuals are the same individuals that were active in the Taliban 20 years ago, raising questions as to whether they really have changed their views. And when we're talking about what the Taliban have done, they've fundamentally had two decades to prepare for this moment. That means that they've had

two decades to understand how they're able to deliver their message and bring about change in Afghanistan that will be accepted, or at least tolerated, by multiple audiences.

That includes the international community, and you can hear that in the Taliban assurances about the protection of human rights and particularly the rights of women. The important caveat, of course, is that it's under Sharia law. The next constituency they're talking to are Afghans. Afghans have been used to living under a very different lifestyle over the past 20 years.

Many Afghans never knew the Taliban government. And importantly, even some of the Taliban foot soldiers were never alive when the Taliban ruled Afghanistan. So there is a question of what that looks like. And finally, there are multiple constituencies within the Taliban. So when we hear the Taliban talking about presenting life under Sharia law, they're talking about Sharia, not just because it is something generic that they can point to and an ideology that they believe in. But when we're talking about Sharia law, what we're talking about is what interpretation of Sharia they agree to.

And it's not clear that there's a consensus within the Taliban itself as to what form of Sharia they will use to govern. That means that when we're talking about this moderation and the portrayal of the Taliban that is coming out from the spokesman, it's designed to ensure that the Taliban gets as much buy-in as possible today.

Jacob Taylor:

And what about outside Afghanistan, or more specifically outside the Taliban with other groups. What does this moderation, to whatever extent it may end up actually existing, and/or the attempts to manage it, mean for the Taliban's relationship with other groups?

Katherine Zimmerman:

The key group that we talk about when discussing the Taliban being moderate, and I'm using that term relative here, is al Qaeda. Looking back at how the Taliban and al Qaeda have related over the years, it's very clear that they are hand in glove, even though they do not always agree, and that's critical to understand. The Taliban fundamentally did not support, and actually did not know about, bin Laden's 9/11 attacks. They disagreed with bin Laden's framing of the global jihad and the idea of taking the fight to the West, but they still provided al Qaeda safe haven.

One of the key terms of the Doha Agreement, the negotiation between the United States and the Taliban, was that the Taliban break ties with al Qaeda. And we have not seen that happen. In fact, we've seen the ties continue to strengthen, though covertly. It's very clear from how the Taliban and al Qaeda have continued to cooperate in Afghanistan that that relationship remains strong and it's unlikely to change at any point in the future.

In terms of the Taliban and other members of the global Salafi Jihadi movement, al Qaeda, and more crucially here, the Islamic State. The Islamic State has declared the Taliban to be an enemy, and there is an Islamic State branch inside of Afghanistan that is trying to threaten the Taliban itself. But, you know, the Taliban itself may eliminate that Islamic State threat, some of those fighters are of course going to switch over to the Taliban, but in terms of the global terrorism threat, what we're looking at here is fundamentally a win for the Salafi Jihadi movement, even with this intra-global jihadist site, between the Taliban al Qaeda faction and the Islamic State.

Jacob Taylor:

That closeness that you mentioned, covert closeness, between the Taliban and al Qaeda, does that essentially mean that the Taliban's success in Afghanistan is a win for al Qaeda as well?

Katherine Zimmerman:

Yes. This is a win for al Qaeda, though al Qaeda might not talk about it publicly in that way. It's going to talk about it being a victory for the Taliban and for Islam writ large. Both the Taliban and al Qaeda have been fighting for the return of the Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan. That has now come about. When we're talking about how this is a victory for al Qaeda, it plays directly into al Qaeda's strategic doctrine, which is to wear down the West so that the West withdraws from Muslim lands. That is precisely what the United States did. When the US left, NATO left, and Afghanistan turned rapidly over to Taliban forces who were able to reconstitute the government that they had before 9/11.

Jacob Taylor:

We're about to mark the 20-year anniversary of 9/11 and the US invasion of Afghanistan. President Biden has essentially argued that the US mission in Afghanistan was to "degrade the terrorist threat of al Qaeda in Afghanistan and kill Osama bin Laden," and he said that was a success. He's also argued that the conflict in Afghanistan's drain on US resources outweighs the threats that we prevent by being there. What are your thoughts?

Katherine Zimmerman:

President Biden is right in terms of how al Qaeda has been degraded over the years. It's certainly true that most of the al Qaeda members who were part and parcel of the 9/11 attack have been brought to justice by the United States. The senior leadership has been decimated by ongoing counter-terrorism operations, and al Qaeda did not have sanctuary inside of Afghanistan for many years. That's all changed now with the Taliban coming back into control, and it was changing in the past year.

When we look at UN reporting on al Qaeda inside of Afghanistan, it's crucial to note that in February the UN reported that all kind of was present in 11 provinces and by June of this year, al Qaeda was in 15 provinces. So al Qaeda was expanding, even as we're talking about withdrawing from the country.

The other issue is that the president was very focused on the counter-terrorism mission, but he didn't talk about the other part of the US mission in Afghanistan, which was to deny al Qaeda and other terrorists a safe haven. The US withdrawal and the return of the Taliban is turning that back over. It's turning over a sanctuary to al Qaeda inside of Afghanistan that will allow the group to reconstitute and could possibly enable it to train for and plan additional attacks against the west.

Jacob Taylor:

If these groups still present a threat to the US and the West and elsewhere, has the War on Terror been a failure, in your opinion?

Katherine Zimmerman:

The War on Terror has been a success in that there has not been another 9/11 over the past 20 years. Counter-terrorism analysts will point to 9/11 as an anomalous attack, that even bin Laden didn't realize how catastrophic that attack would be on the United States. But even in terms of mass casualty attacks, al Qaeda and other groups have fundamentally been challenged in being able to pull off a terror attack here in the US homeland. So, when we're talking about "has the War on Terror prevented terror"? Yes.

The flip side of that is the War on Terror has included lots of branches and sequels on the ground. And I think that's where people talk about it not being successful. The War on Terror has become conflated with some of the US military interventions, like in Afghanistan, that went beyond just counter-terrorism, that moved into nation building.

The other problem with the War on Terror is it was focused just on terrorism. And so we've seen a proliferation

of groups that espouse al Qaeda's ideology, the Islamic State, al Qaeda, Boko Haram, some of these groups that you've heard about that talk about the same ideas as bin Laden. And they now are operating across the globe. So, have we failed fundamentally to prevent the spread of this ideology that breeds terror? Yes. So, "is the War on Terror a success?" is a very complicated question, and I think it goes down to what the objective was. If it's to defeat the terrorism threat, the United States has become phenomenal at identifying and removing terrorist threats. If it's to defeat the ideology that bred those threats, the War on Terror has not done so well.

Jacob Taylor:

Can you explain that a little bit more? Specifically, the part about why defeating a terrorism threat is not enough to defeat the groups themselves.

Katherine Zimmerman:

It's something that's missed because when the United States talks about its counter-terrorism strategy, it talks about also defeating al Qaeda and defeating the Islamic State and defeating the groups that promote these terrorism threats. But the counter-terrorism strategy itself is only oriented on stopping individuals from committing acts of terror. That means that it is fundamentally defensive. It's looking at identifying threats wherever they are, whether they're here in the homeland or abroad. So the terror attack cells themselves, identifying them, finding out who the individuals are, finding out their networks, doing counter threat finance, so preventing them from getting money, preventing them from travel through sanctions.

And, you know, when we can't reach that individual, we send in our special operators to conduct raids. Or, if we can't do that, then we rely on drone strikes. And that fundamentally has been the counter-terrorism strategy. All of that is effective at weakening these groups. And the kind of broad component has also been to remove their sanctuaries. The challenge is that that strategy isn't oriented on defeating the groups themselves. It offers a military defeat of these groups, like we saw inside of Iraq, where we've been able to push groups like the Islamic State off of the land that it controlled, but it allows the group to reconstitute and come back. And so the real challenge with counter-terrorism is that it isn't a strategy to end the commitment of resources. It's a strategy to keep Americans safe.

Jacob Taylor:

And has that been the case in Afghanistan? Essentially, the US was effective at countering specific terrorist threats, but was unable to degrade the effectiveness of the groups themselves, in this case, the Taliban and al Qaeda?

Katherine Zimmerman:

The Afghanistan case is special because it's transformed so much over the past 20 years. When the United States went in originally, it went in with the mindset of toppling the Taliban government and holding those individuals accountable who were behind the 9/11 attacks, as well as preventing Afghanistan from ever becoming a sanctuary for terrorists. Again, that quickly morphed into this idea of building an Afghan state, of nation building. And it led to a surge of resources into Afghanistan, many of which went to waste. It's hard not to gloss over the volume of American resources that disappeared into Afghanistan. And because of the high level of US resources, both blood and treasure, to the war in Afghanistan, we saw under President Obama an effort to start winding that war down. And it became, again, a counter-terrorism mission focused fundamentally on the parts of the groups that pose a direct threat to the United States.

When we're talking about the issues in Afghanistan, I think one of the critiques, and I'll point you to the Afghan study group report of which Kim Kagan was a part. It fundamentally points to the challenge that there is an ongoing civil war in Afghanistan, and the US strategy was never really designed to resolve that civil war. So while we are focused on counter-terrorism, we weren't focused on the conditions inside of Afghanistan, the political condi-

tions, that were breeding the insecurity that was giving rise to the terrorists themselves.

Jacob Taylor:

Turning to some of those specific groups to which those terrorists belong, you've argued in some of your recent work that Afghanistan is not as important to al Qaeda as it used to be. Does al Qaeda still need Afghanistan? And what is the significance of the country to al Qaeda?

Katherine Zimmerman:

It's quite true that al Qaeda has proliferated outside of Afghanistan. That its strongest presence has not been inside of the country for years. You can easily point to the group in Yemen, which has been behind the most transnational attacks, the ones against the United States, the Christmas day underwear bombing attack in 2009, the parcel plot in 2010 and other attempts thereafter. They're the reason why we sometimes can't bring laptops onto planes.

As to why Afghanistan is not as important to al Qaeda any more, I think the challenge is Afghanistan fundamentally is important to both al Qaeda and the Salafi Jihadi movement because of what it stands for. There is nothing that can replace the propaganda effect of being able to say that we, the mujahideen, have defeated the Soviets and the United States inside of Afghanistan. There's also nothing to replace the addition of another sanctuary for al Qaeda to train and the sponsorship of a Taliban government to protect al Qaeda from outside intervention if al Qaeda starts to step out of line. And when we're talking about Afghanistan, it is a vast, rough terrain, which means that it will be very difficult to find the individuals that we're searching for, even if we had perfect intelligence.

Ensuring that our over-the-horizon counter-terrorism posture, which is what the Biden administration is talking about, will be able to defeat any threat coming out of Afghanistan; that's very, very difficult. We have to know about the threat in order to hit it. And for al Qaeda to be given this sanctuary means that we've simply enabled the group to have another place in its collection around the world from which to train, plot, and strengthen.

Jacob Taylor:

And what would you say the risk is that comes from allowing al Qaeda to do that?

Katherine Zimmerman:

The risk is one that we know very well. And I think it's hard to argue that there is no risk. Al Qaeda had sanctuary in Afghanistan 20 years ago, from which it planned the 9/11 attacks. The Taliban may try to constrain al Qaeda and argue against it pursuing this global jihad. And there's actually potential for al Qaeda to delay its fight. But when we look at what Zawahiri, the current leader of al Qaeda, and other individuals believe, they believe that you have to take the fight to the West first before bringing it to the Muslim world, which means the target remains on America's back.

When we're turning over Afghanistan to the Taliban and asking the Taliban to ensure that there is no terror threat coming out of Afghanistan, it just doesn't make sense. Afghanistan can provide a training ground for fighters who will build personal relationships and they can leave Afghanistan and then move on from there to attack the United States or others. The Taliban can claim deniability. And those individuals will have connected into a robust human network that stretches across the Muslim world that enables them to really use their terror threat capabilities to pull off another attack.

Jacob Taylor:

The Biden administration has said that it's set on ending the "forever wars," and it appears to have done so. How-

ever, that said, is the war over for al Qaeda?

Katherine Zimmerman:

The problem with framing this as the end of the forever war is that al Qaeda has not declared the war over. For al Qaeda, the war is over when there is an Islamic caliphate, which is at some point in the future. Al Qaeda sees this war as a long war. It describes Americans as being too impatient to see the war through, not committed enough to see the war through, and that it will wear Americans down.

What al Qaeda will interpret from what has happened in Afghanistan is that that strategy works. That al Qaeda and others can simply outlast the Americans, who are better equipped and better resourced, in order to have a victory at the end of the day. It also means that al Qaeda will eventually turn back to using terror to try to force the West out of the Muslim world. That strategy has been effective for the organization.

Jacob Taylor:

What do you think America's counter-terrorism strategy will look like in the future?

Katherine Zimmerman:

The US strategy is going to look very similar to the approach that the US has successfully, to some degree, used in places like Yemen and Somalia, where we have special forces working with local partners to counter the threats and we have ongoing intelligence collection to identify them. And, if we cannot disrupt them on the ground, which means sending in a team of special forces to conduct a counter-terrorism raid, we'll turn to drone strikes to defeat them from the air.

The other part of the counter-terrorism strategy is going to be all of the Homeland Security and national security protocols that we have here in the United States to keep terrorism, international terrorism, out of the homeland. That's going to be continued work with the TSA, airline and aviation security, defense at the border, all the screenings that we go through about who is coming into the country, monitoring threats inside of the country, and ensuring that no networks are able to mobilize individuals here.

The challenge with that, of course, is that with commercially available technology and with the innovation that has happened in terms of terrorism itself, there are ways to conduct quite deadly terror attacks with off-the-shelf solutions. And it makes it very difficult for the FBI and other American agencies to identify an individual in the United States who is radicalizing and who is then moving into conducting a terror attack.

The last bit is that, the way to think about this is, fundamentally, the counter-terrorism strategy that we have in place and that we are going to be pursuing is defensive in nature. It's identifying threats and preventing them from happening. It's not actually going after the source of a threat.

Jacob Taylor:

Which leads me to my next question. What do you think the US strategy should look like?

Katherine Zimmerman:

The strategy that we need needs to go beyond counter-terrorism, and this means that we will need to continue doing all of the things that we are doing. We need to continue collecting intelligence, preventing terror attacks as we start to see them form and keeping our borders and American citizens safe here at home. But we need a strategy that actually will defeat these groups on the ground. And that means not leading with our military, but leading with our diplomats, something that the Biden administration has talked about. It means a strategy that works with foreign assistance to start changing the conditions on the ground and really tapping into the grievances that local

populations feel that have enabled these groups to get their talons into the local populations.

If you think back over the past 10 years, it wasn't until the insecurity and collapse of governments following the Arab Spring that we saw al Qaeda and the Islamic State really be able to strengthen within the Muslim world. And the problem has been we've always divorced our counter-terrorism strategy from the strategy to dealing with fragility and insecurity and the resilience of local populations. Al Qaeda knows this very well. Al Qaeda talks about needing to not be isolated from the masses by offering them basic governance. So leading with food, justice, security, things that people need to survive.

The United States could rapidly shift conditions so that these groups are isolated from the populations by competing with them at a very basic level and delivering some of the goods and services that these populations otherwise receive from terror groups or trying to resolve some of the very local conflicts that have enabled these terror groups to expand.

Jacob Taylor:

Katherine Zimmerman, thank you so much for being with us today.

Katherine Zimmerman:

It's been great chatting with you.

Kim Kagen:

Thank you for listening to this episode of *Overwatch*. We look forward to your feedback on this episode and previous ones. Visit www.understandingwar.org to learn about ISW's work and to sign up for our mailing list.