

# DEBATES ON THE 9/11 ATTACKS

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# Important Events of the 9/11 Attacks



**1979**

Soviet troops invade Afghanistan.

**1990**

US forces embark on a campaign to drive Iraqi troops out of Kuwait in the Gulf War.

**2001**

Terrorists attack the United States on September 11; US forces invade Afghanistan on October 7; the USA Patriot Act is signed into law on October 26.



1975

1980

1985

1990

1995

2000

**1979**

The United States begins providing covert support to the Afghan mujahideen, who were fighting to drive Soviet forces out of Afghanistan.

**1996**

Osama bin Laden declares war on the United States.

**1993**

Islamist terrorists explode a bomb beneath the World Trade Center, killing six and wounding hundreds.

**1991**

The Soviet Union collapses, ending the Cold War.

**1989**

The last Soviet troops withdraw from Afghanistan.





**2004**

Islamist terrorists kill 190 people with bombs on commuter trains in Madrid, Spain.



**2005**

Islamist radicals detonate bombs in London's subway system.

**2002**

The US Congress establishes the 9/11 Commission to investigate the terrorist attacks.

**2006**

The leader of al Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, is killed by US forces.

**2011**

Osama bin Laden is killed by US special operations forces in Pakistan.

**2015**

Congress passes the USA Freedom Act, which restores expired parts of the USA Patriot Act.

**2002**

**2004**

**2006**

**2008**

**2010**

**2012**

**2014**

**2003**

US forces invade Iraq and overthrow Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein.



**2013**

Leaked documents reveal that the National Security Agency was spying on American citizens in violation of US law.

**2014**

The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), a terrorist group that arose out of al Qaeda in Iraq, proclaims the founding of a caliphate, or Islamic State, that stretches across Iraq and Syria.



## Chapter Three

# Was 9/11 a Response to US Foreign Policy?

### 9/11 Was a Response to US Foreign Policy

- The 9/11 attacks were a response to US policy in the Islamic world, in the eyes of the attackers.
- US support for the mujahideen in Afghanistan helped create the conditions for the rise of al Qaeda.
- US military action in the Middle East has created resentment among Muslims.



### The Debate at a Glance

### 9/11 Was Not a Response to US Foreign Policy

- US support for the mujahideen did not cause the rise of al Qaeda.
- The United States would have been a target even if it had a different foreign policy.
- Terrorist attacks in Europe indicate that al Qaeda is at war with the entire Western world, not a nation's particular foreign policy.

# 9/11 Was a Response to US Foreign Policy

*“The suicidal assassins of September 11, 2001, did not ‘attack America,’ as our political leaders and the news media like to maintain; they attacked American foreign policy.”*

—Chalmers Johnson, political scientist

Chalmers Johnson, “Blowback: US Actions Abroad Have Repeatedly Led to Unintended, Indefensible Consequences,” *Nation*, September 27, 2001. [www.thenation.com](http://www.thenation.com).

## Consider these questions as you read:

1. Was the United States justified in supporting the mujahideen in Afghanistan? Why or why not?
2. Does the United States rely too much on military engagement with the Middle East and too little on peaceful engagement? Explain.
3. Under what circumstances do people have the right to fight against foreign troops that have entered their countries?

Editor’s note: The discussion that follows presents common arguments made in support of this perspective. All arguments are supported by facts, quotes, and examples taken from various sources of the period or present day.

In his 1996 “Declaration of War Against America,” Osama bin Laden argued that his violent campaign against Americans was motivated by US military action in the Middle East and the cooperation of Middle Eastern governments with the United States.

Understanding the 9/11 attacks, therefore, requires an understanding of how US foreign policy has contributed to the rise of al Qaeda and Islamist terrorism. This is not to say the United States caused the attack, but that the attack was a response to US policy in the Middle East. “Nothing justifies terrorism. Period,”

foreign policy specialist M.J. Rosenberg writes in the *Huffington Post*. “That does not mean that nothing causes it.”<sup>28</sup>

Rosenberg was arguing that we can make sense of the attacks only by understanding that US policies sometimes have

**“Nothing justifies terrorism. Period. That does not mean that nothing causes it.”<sup>28</sup>**

—M.J. Rosenberg, foreign policy specialist

unintentional consequences. This is often referred to as blowback, a negative, unforeseen reaction to a particular policy. In the Middle East, US intervention is often resented because it relies so heavily on military intervention, even if US intentions are good. “Terrorists (in this case Muslim terrorists) target

the United States because they perceive us as their enemy. And with good reason,” Rosenberg writes. “We have been at war with the people of various Muslim countries for decades.”<sup>29</sup>

US foreign policy has caused resentment among Muslims and inspired terrorist groups to attack the United States. Both the birth of al Qaeda and the terrorist group’s rationale for attacking the United States were directly related to US foreign policy in the Middle East.

## Afghanistan and the Birth of al Qaeda

Since 9/11 many scholars have pointed out that the United States and Bin Laden fought on the same side against a common enemy in an earlier conflict. In 1979 the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, sparking a revolt by Afghan insurgents known as mujahideen. The word *mujahideen* refers to Muslims engaged in jihad. In this particular case, the jihad was waged against the pro-Soviet government of Afghanistan and the Soviet troops who were invited into Afghanistan to crush the mujahideen.

The presence of Soviet troops in Afghanistan allowed the mujahideen to appeal to the religious feelings of Muslims across the Middle East to gather recruits to fight the Russians in a holy war.

Bin Laden himself answered this call to jihad. He set up a base in Afghanistan and used his family's fortune to equip and train the mujahideen.

At the same time, the United States launched a covert campaign, code-named Operation Cyclone, to help the Islamic warriors resist Soviet occupation. US funds—and weapons bought with US money—flowed to the mujahideen throughout the conflict. The US media also made heroes of the Islamic holy warriors fighting the Soviet superpower with old rifles and simple hit-and-run tactics. “Afghan recruits have managed to put down a brave resistance,” read a 1984 editorial in the *Washington Post*. “Simple people, fighting with hand-me-down weapons, have borne tremendous costs and kept a modern, well-armed state from imposing an alien political will. The fight for freedom in Afghanistan is an awesome spectacle and deserves generous tribute.”<sup>30</sup>

This romanticized view of the mujahideen helped secure even more funding from the US Congress. As support grew, so too did Afghan military successes against the Russians. With advanced weaponry purchased with US money, the mujahideen were able to shoot down the much-feared Soviet gunships and fighter jets and destroy Soviet tanks. In 1989 the battered, demoralized Soviet army withdrew from Afghanistan in defeat.

## Afghan Veterans Turn on America

The Americans were elated by this victory over the Soviet Union. So were Bin Laden and the other warriors who had defeated a modern superpower in Afghanistan in the name of Islam. “In Afghanistan was assembled the first truly global army of Islamic warriors—the Afghan Arabs,” writes Fawaz A. Gerges, a scholar of Islamist extremism. “For a fleeting moment in Afghanistan, in the eyes of Islamists and Muslims alike, there existed a community of believers united in arms against infidel encroachment and aggression.”<sup>31</sup>

After the Afghan conflict, Bin Laden and other anti-Soviet foreign fighters organized al Qaeda. And they chose a new enemy



for their international jihad against the enemies of Islam — the United States. By supporting the jihadists in the war in Afghanistan, the United States had unintentionally helped facilitate the rise of a global campaign of Islamist terrorism, which ultimately found its way back to the United States on 9/11.

There were, in fact, a few lonely voices that predicted this consequence of aiding the rise of religiously inspired militants. Eqbal Ahmad, a Pakistani political scientist, was one of them. “They’re going to go for you. They’re going to do a lot more,” Ahmad warned in a speech three years before the 9/11 attacks. “These are the chickens of the Afghanistan war coming home to roost.”<sup>32</sup>

## **The Armies of the Unbelievers**

Bin Laden was full of confidence after the Afghan war. In 1990, when Iraq invaded Kuwait, Bin Laden offered to use his army of Islamists to help Saudi Arabia defeat Iraq’s secular dictator, Saddam Hussein, who was also threatening the Saudi kingdom. Bin Laden was humiliated when the Saudi royal family rebuffed his offer and instead invited US troops to Saudi Arabia as a staging ground for an invasion of Iraq. He viewed Saudi cooperation with American military forces as an offense against Islam. “Failure of the regime to protect the country, and allowing the enemy of Crusader-American forces to occupy the land present the main reason for our disaster in every aspect,”<sup>33</sup> Bin Laden wrote in his “Declaration of War.”

As the site of Islam’s two holiest cities, Mecca and Medina, Saudi Arabia is considered by many Muslims to be sacred land. It is the land where Islam was born. Bin Laden viewed the US military presence in Saudi Arabia as an insult to Islam and called on Muslims everywhere to attack American troops and drive them out, “destroying, fighting and killing the enemy until, by the Grace of Allah, it is completely defeated.”<sup>34</sup>

The US military presence in the Middle East allowed al Qaeda to argue that the United States was waging war on Muslims.

*A US armed column leaves the Kuwait International Airport during the 1991 campaign to expel Iraqi troops from Kuwait. Some in the Middle East saw the conflict as a war against Muslims.*



And each time a US bomb killed civilians or TV news showed images of destroyed homes in Iraq, Bin Laden found it easier to recruit terrorists for al Qaeda and his war against America. “The presence of American troops on Saudi soil galvanized the faction of al-Qaida that wanted to focus on the ‘far enemy’ [the United States] first,” according to Adam Mausner, an international relations scholar. “Al-Qaida really got on the road to 9/11 because of American troops’ presence in Saudi Arabia.”<sup>35</sup>

### **Supporting Repressive Regimes**

While the terrorists themselves claimed that they attacked the United States on 9/11 because of US foreign policy, official US government statements instead focused on al Qaeda’s

## Source Notes

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Malala Yousafzai and Patricia McCormick, *I Am Malala: How One Girl Stood Up for Education and Changed the World*. Boston: Little, Brown, 2014.

### Websites

**Oral Histories, 9/11 Memorial & Museum** ([www.911memorial.org/oral-histories-0](http://www.911memorial.org/oral-histories-0)). This site features audio files of witnesses, first responders, and others recalling the events of September 11.

**September 11th Digital Archive** (<http://911digitalarchive.org>). This archive includes a digital collection of photographs and audio recordings related to the events of September 11.



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