

The New Geopolitics

How did the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, affect global politics?

Vocabulary

Glossary Vocabulary Cards

war on terror

weapons of mass destruction (WMD)

nation building

Arab Spring

Introduction



An annual “Tribute in Light” memorializes the victims at Ground Zero, the site of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York City.

On the morning of September 11, 2001, a series of delays made Richard Moller late to work. His office was on the 100th floor of the North Tower of the World Trade Center in New York City. Before Moller reached his office, an airplane hijacked by terrorists smashed into the North Tower. Moller realized that the delays that morning had saved his life. “If I had gotten in an elevator just a few minutes earlier,” he recalled, “I would be dead.”

Most Americans can recall exactly where they were when they heard the news. Many people turned on their televisions just in time to see a second passenger plane slam into the South Tower 17 minutes after the first. As fire began consuming the upper floors of both buildings, most people in the towers managed to escape down stairwells. But many did not. Shock turned to horror as the Twin Towers collapsed. The South Tower was the first to fall at 9:59 a.m. The North Tower collapsed at 10:28 a.m. Less than an hour before, a third hijacked passenger jet had crashed into the Pentagon building near Washington, D.C. Soon after

came news that a fourth hijacked plane had crashed in Pennsylvania.

As Americans watched the tragedy unfold, they reacted with emotions ranging from bewilderment and dismay to anger and outrage. Most sensed that life had suddenly changed. The deaths provoked both an outpouring of grief and tremendous anxiety as Americans all around the country asked one another, “Are you all right?” In just two hours, nearly 3,000 people lost their lives.

In this lesson, you will learn about how the terrorist attacks of 9/11 had shattered the sense of security Americans had built after the Cold War. You will also discover how the hopes for a more peaceful world were displaced by a resurgence of international conflict.

1. The Immediate Impact of 9/11

With the most powerful military in the world, most Americans had believed that the United States was secure from outside threats. But after 9/11, there was a mixture of stunned disbelief and fear. No one knew how many terrorists might still be in the country. Muslim Americans faced harsh and racist attacks by people who wrongly believed that al Qaeda was supported by Islam and the majority of Muslims. The fear of possible future attacks affected U.S. policy at home and abroad. These changes spread across the world, inciting fear in other Western countries, such as the UK, and shaping a new geopolitical age.

The Start of the War on Terror Americans quickly learned that the international terrorist network al Qaeda had carried out the 9/11 attacks. The organization’s leader was Osama bin Laden, a wealthy Saudi Arabian and Muslim extremist. Al Qaeda sought to rid Muslim countries of Western influence and establish a “pan-Islamic caliphate.” Bin Laden believed that all Muslims had a duty “to kill the Americans and their allies—civilian or military.” While the vast majority of Muslims rejected bin Laden’s words and believed terrorism was counter to Islamic values, some felt that the United States did not respect Islam or threatened Muslim interests. Bin Laden used those bitter feelings to promote his cause and to recruit terrorists throughout the world.

Bin Laden’s goal for the 9/11 attacks was to provoke the United States into a costly war that would destabilize the world and “hemorrhage” the U.S. economy. He believed that a global, ongoing war between the

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West and the Islamic world would allow him to seize power and establish the pan-Islamic caliphate.

The United States reacted strongly to 9/11. It created the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), National Counter Terrorism Center (NCTC), and Transportation Security Administration (TSA) to protect the United States at home. President Bush also declared a **war on terror**. In a speech to Congress, Bush explained that the war would be waged not only against the terrorists themselves, but also against any governments that sponsored them.

Confronting the Taliban in Afghanistan The war on terror began in Afghanistan. At the time, a radical group called the Taliban controlled the nation. These ultraconservative Muslims were known for their harsh punishments and their rules barring women from working, receiving an education, or enjoying other basic rights. The Taliban also permitted al Qaeda to operate terrorist training camps on Afghan soil.



After 9/11, airports increased security to try to prevent future terrorist acts. Security officials carried out more rigorous searches and began to use full-body scanners. Other measures included banning containers of liquid larger than 3.4 ounces, requiring the removal of shoes, and scanning all baggage.



U.S. soldiers and Iraqi civilians toppled this statue of Saddam Hussein after he was overthrown. In 2006, Hussein was executed.

President Bush asked the Taliban to turn Osama bin Laden over to the United States after 9/11, but the Afghan leaders refused. The United States then formed an international coalition, which included anti-Taliban Afghan militias, to overthrow the Taliban and capture bin Laden. By mid-November 2001, Afghanistan's capital, Kabul, and other major cities had fallen, and Taliban rule in Afghanistan ended. U.S. forces then began to hunt for bin Laden and his followers, who had gone into hiding.

Fighting the Iraqi Regime After 9/11, President Bush urged that Iraq be included in the war on terror, even though the Arab nation had taken no direct action against the United States. Since taking power in 1979, Iraq's dictator Saddam Hussein, a Sunni Muslim, had murdered many thousands of Shi'ites and other Iraqis. The Sunni and Shi'a branches of Islam have a long-standing conflict in the Muslim world. Hussein had also used chemical weapons against the Kurds, an ethnic group in northern Iraq. After the Persian Gulf War, Hussein had gone back on promises to allow UN inspectors to search for **weapons of mass destruction** (WMD) in Iraq. WMD include chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons, which the coalition forces had banned.

Bush was ready to act unilaterally without the approval of U.S. allies or the UN. Normally, the UN would be responsible for inspecting and policing issues regarding weapons of mass destruction. This foreign policy of taking action to head off trouble became known as the Bush Doctrine. In October 2002, persuaded by Bush's arguments, Congress authorized the president to send troops to Iraq if necessary. In March 2003, the United States launched an invasion of Iraq supported by

some three dozen nations who pledged to also send troops. But several European allies, including France and Germany, opposed the invasion, and the UN failed to approve it.

Coalition forces toppled the Iraqi government within a month. Hussein escaped, but was later captured, tried in an Iraqi court, and executed. U.S. inspection teams searched for banned weapons but discovered, to their surprise, that Iraq had no significant weapons of mass destruction.

Since this discovery, many have questioned whether the United States was justified in the initial invasion of Iraq and raise doubts about Bush's motives for pushing war. David Kay, who led the U.S. search for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, called for an investigation of the flawed intelligence regarding Iraq's weapons. In 2005, the Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States concluded that "the Intelligence Community was dead wrong in almost all of its pre-war judgements about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction . . . What the intelligence professionals told you about Saddam Hussein's programs was what they believed. They were simply wrong."

2. The War Continues

The United States' vision for a short conflict that would resolve the issues and fears of terrorism in Afghanistan and Iraq turned into decade long conflicts. The longer the United States remained involved, the more complex the situations became and the harder it was to withdraw U.S. troops from the area. In toppling the current regimes, the United States left these areas with a large amount of political instability. U.S. leaders believed that the continued presence of U.S. troops would help stabilize the governments.



U.S. soldiers operated checkpoints throughout Iraq. This checkpoint in Makhmur, in northern Iraq, was at the site of a refugee camp.

Rebuilding Iraq Although most Iraqis welcomed the end of Hussein's regime, some resented having foreign troops in their country. After the invasion and short period of intense warfare that overthrew the Iraqi government, many major cities experienced a period of severe violence and looting. Some saw the U.S. overthrow of the Iraqi government as a new type of imperialism, especially as the occupation of Iraq stretched from months into years. Others believed that Iraq was better without the brutality of Hussein's government. Many religious leaders who had been persecuted by Hussein's regime were able to return to Iraq and the holy cities that they had been barred from entering.

The removal of Hussein's regime, however, did not lead to a stable Iraq. An armed resistance, including insurgent forces from both inside and outside of Iraq, soon rose up to battle the coalition forces. Meanwhile, armed conflicts between rival Sunni and Shi'a militias increased, especially in Baghdad. Many analysts began calling the conflict in Iraq a civil war. Civilian casualties from violence grew into the tens of thousands.

The United States and Iraq began the difficult task of **nation**

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building—the construction of political institutions and a stable government within a country. The United States helped create transitional governments. In 2005, as political violence increased, Iraqi citizens around the world elected Jalal Talabani as the president of Iraq. The political violence finally began to decrease in 2007, and in 2010, President Obama announced that all U.S. troops would leave Iraq by the end of the following year. The withdrawal went as scheduled, and U.S. troops formally left the Arab nation in December 2011.

The War in Afghanistan Continues The Taliban, aided by advisors from al Qaeda, resurfaced in Afghanistan and were able to take back territory that they had lost earlier. In late 2009, Obama sent about 30,000 U.S. troops to help NATO forces and the Afghan army thwart the Taliban assaults. Despite this increase, the Taliban and al Qaeda were able to remain operational by hiding across the border in Pakistan. NATO began the process of transferring military and security responsibilities to the Afghan forces in 2011.



New technology, like the Predator B unmanned aircraft, have drastically changed the landscape of war. However, the increase in drone strikes has led to an increased number of civilian casualties.

Meanwhile, the U.S. military also launched a campaign of drone attacks against al Qaeda, killing a number of al Qaeda officials in Pakistan. The drone strikes carried out by the United States grew in frequency and caused an increasing number of civilian casualties. Public outrage over these deaths caused the Pakistani government to protest that the United States was violating its sovereignty. Pakistan reacted even more strongly in May 2011, when a U.S. assault force on the ground finally located and killed Osama bin Laden in Pakistan. Pakistan had claimed that bin Laden was not in Pakistan. However, his location in a compound near the Pakistan Military Academy brought these claims into question. This strained the already fragile relationship between the United States and Pakistan.

With bin Laden dead and the Taliban apparently in retreat, Obama

decided to begin reducing the number of U.S. soldiers in the region. However, some U.S. forces stayed past Obama's 2014 withdraw date, mainly to train more Afghan forces in counterterrorist and insurgent operations.

The Rise of Cyber-Terrorism Cyber-terrorists use digital technology to disrupt business, affect services, or block access to needed information. Some nations use cyber-terrorism as a weapon. There is widespread belief that groups with ties to North Korea, as well as agents of the North Korean government, are responsible for launching global attacks of cyber-terrorism. These often include strikes against targets like financial institutions, subway systems, and networks that hold military information. Experts also warn that terrorist groups like ISIS are developing similar capabilities.

3. The Arab Spring

Mohamed Bouazizi was a Tunisian street vendor who was constantly harassed by corrupt Tunisian officials. On December 17, 2010, Bouazizi was beaten, his property was confiscated. When he went to complain to the governor of his unfair treatment, he was denied a meeting. That afternoon, Bouazizi set himself on fire outside of the governor's office. His actions highlighted the public's feelings toward ongoing corruption, underemployment, and authoritarianism both in Tunisia and across the Middle East and North Africa. A wave of protests broke out in Tunisia and spread throughout the region. Bouazizi became the catalyst for the Arab Spring.

Days of Rage Bouazizi died on January 4, 2011 as protests continued throughout Tunisia. Protesters called for the removal of Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, the president of Tunisia, and an end to the corruption and authoritarianism of the Tunisian government. Attempts made by the Tunisian government to suppress the protesters were met with harsh international criticism. Within one month of Bouazizi's act of self-immolation, Ben Ali resigned and left Tunisia.



During the Arab Spring, protests in Cairo were held in Tahrir Square. Between January 25 and February 11, 2011, when the first wave of protests occurred, an estimated 2 million people attended protests there.

Citizens of countries across the Middle East and North Africa were inspired by the events happening in Tunisia. In early 2011, protests and revolts erupted in this largely Arab Muslim region. This series of revolts became known as the **Arab Spring**.

Some of the largest protests of the Arab Spring took place in February 2011. These large protests were called a “Day of Rage.” Tens of thousands of protesters across the Middle East and North Africa took part in a Day of Rage. In Egypt, activists chanted, “Revolution until victory.” In Amman, the capital of Jordan, protesters cried, “The people want to reform the regime” and “We want a fair electoral law.” Protesters in Bahrain waved the flag and shouted, “For Bahrain’s future, we are not afraid to be killed.”

In many of these protests, social media played a key role. Activists used Facebook and Twitter posts to help organize and spread information about the uprisings. Demonstrations took place in Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, Bahrain, Algeria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Lebanon, Iran, Syria, and elsewhere. The level of violence during these protests varied.

The People Overthrow Authoritarians The demonstrations that took place during the Arab Spring left a lasting impact on the region. Massive, largely peaceful protests in the capital city of Cairo led to a dismantling of the government and the arrest of Egypt’s president, Hosni Mubarak. In Libya, anti-government actions took the form of an

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armed rebellion. With the help of NATO air strikes, the rebel army managed to gain control of the country in August and oust the Libyan dictator, Muammar al-Gaddafi. He was killed by the opposition shortly after his capture.



This picture shows empty tear gas containers used by police officers during the Bahrain protests. These protests took place in February 2011 as a part of the Arab Spring.

Syria's dictatorship government, led by Bashar al-Assad, responded to antigovernment unrest with military force. Although the United States, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom called on Assad to step down, Assad's crackdown continued. By early 2012, more than 7,000 Syrians had died.

At least ten governments underwent changes as a result of the Arab Spring. Some governments were completely overthrown, while others underwent reforms. However, overthrowing authoritarian rule is not easy. Neither is replacing it with a democratic government. Many countries were thrown into crisis. In Syria, the protests quickly turned into a civil war which has continued through 2019.

Countries in transition to democracy, however, do not need to go it alone. Just as NATO supported Libyan freedom fighters, other global

organizations stand ready to help in the transition to democratic rule. The United Nations made clear its intention to promote justice, human rights, and political security in the region. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) promised aid as a way of encouraging economic security and stability. Even with this support, the future of democratizing countries is uncertain.

4. Historical Tensions Reemerge

The end of the Cold War brought an era of relative peace to the United States. Many hoped that the fear they experienced during that time was over, and that the peace that they enjoyed would last. Since 9/11, however, the world has seen a resurgence of violence and tension. International relationships have become strained and hostile, and old resentments have resurfaced.



Protesters gathered near Washington, D.C., to call for an investigation into Trump's involvement with the Russian interference in the 2016 elections. Protests were held across the country demanding that an impartial investigation take place.

A Strained Relationship Between the United States and Europe After World War I, the United States became a global power and influential force for democracy. It overtook Europe as the leader of the Western world.

After 9/11, countering terrorism became the priority of U.S. foreign

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policy. The war on terror worked to eliminate potential threats against the United States, something that was suddenly at the forefront of the public's minds. However, the war on terror came with heavy costs that many in the West did not agree with. For example, many European countries, as well as the UN, did not agree with the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

The United States has further parted ways with its traditional allies on other matters. For example, in 2017, President Trump announced his intention to withdraw the United States from the Paris Agreement, an international agreement aimed at slowing down rapid climate change. He took an "America First" approach, claiming that the efforts to improve our global environment would be harmful to the U.S. economy. Many European leaders were outraged by this decision, as the issues of climate change affect the entire world. Policies like this strained the United States' relationship with Europe.

Because of these policies, the United States has slowly been stepping away from its place as an international leader. As a result, several European countries have taken the lead.

Tensions Between Cold War Rivals Grow Tensions have also grown between Russia and the United States and its European allies. As the Cold War came to a close, the United States, as well as U.S. allies in Europe, felt relief. The threat of nuclear war fell as peace talks occurred and treaties were signed. But the United States and Russia still have a precarious relationship. Clashing ideals and struggles for political and economic influence have shaped U.S.-Russia relations for decades.

During the 2016 presidential election, fears arose that the Russian government had interfered with the election. Through a series of multiagency investigations, it was revealed that the Russian government was involved in hacking efforts against the Democratic Party. The Office of the Director of National Intelligence reported that "Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered an influence campaign in 2016 aimed at the US presidential election. Russia's goals were to undermine public faith in the US democratic process, denigrate Secretary Clinton, and harm her electability and potential presidency . . . We have high confidence in these judgments." Despite the initial apparent friendship between President Trump and President Putin, other government officials have continued to point out the ongoing issues between the United States and Russia. Former House Speaker Paul Ryan stated that the Russian government "remains hostile to our most basic values and ideals." With the information that Russia actively worked toward undermining democracy in the United States, tensions between the two countries increased.

In another echo of the Cold War era, the United States and North Korea also have a strained relationship and a threat of nuclear war. Since the Korean War, North Korea has viewed the United States as an active enemy. It worked with the Soviet Union in the 1980s to develop nuclear power and, after failed attempts at disarmament agreements, tested its first nuclear weapon in 2006. Throughout the next ten years, relations between North Korea and the United States became more strained. Many fear that the ideological differences between these nations, combined with North Korea's advancement in nuclear technology, could lead to a new Cold War.

Summary

In this lesson, you read about how the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, changed U.S. foreign policy. This policy shift affected global politics, and started conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. U.S. relations with Europe, Russia, and North Korea have weakened or become strained.

Cultural Interaction After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, clashes between ideals have increased. Throughout North Africa and the Middle East, protests have pushed against authoritarianism and toward democracy. As U.S. foreign policy has changed, tensions between the United States and Russia have reemerged, while tensions have grown between the United States and Europe.

Economic Structures Economic inequality, marked by underemployment and corruption, has been prevalent in authoritarian regimes throughout North Africa and the Middle East. It was one of the factors that led to the Arab Spring.

Social Structures Conflicts between religious sects and ethnic groups destabilized areas and helped lead to the formation of terrorist organizations. In the Middle East and North Africa, authoritarian regimes have created divisions in society between the rulers and citizens of these nations.