

9/11 + 10 Years

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, SEP 6 2011

I see the following results from the war that the 9/11 attacks against the United States provoked a decade ago:

1. Al Qaeda and its main affiliates have been essentially defeated, surviving as a fragment only by hiding in pockets of ungoverned territories, worried always by a surprise attack, and unable to conduct significant operations against its prime target, the United States.
2. The human costs of the war, especially in its main theaters—Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan—has been tremendous, much as a result of civil war and terrorist attacks against civilians, rather than irrational retaliation.
3. The cost to the United States has been high with over 6,000 military personnel killed, tens of thousands wounded, and at least two trillion dollars in related expenditures. The lives of all Americans and all who visit America have been disrupted and monitored in some way due to the attacks.
4. The United States anti-terror capabilities have evolved to the point that there is a capacity to track and eliminate threats globally. Agency coordination, surveillance, and operational practice have been greatly improved. Intelligence on terrorists still has its limits, but fewer than before the 9/11 attacks.
5. The American defense budget has nearly doubled since 9/11. It will take years to return it to the scale appropriate for America's limited security threats, and oversized and largely unnecessary and self-imposed global security responsibilities.
6. Many Americans, but unfortunately not all, have learned the utter futility of Counter-Insurgency Operations of the nation building variety, the one enshrined in the joint Army-Marine Corps manual. It is possible to kill insurgents (and some locals), but not to gift nations capable, corruption free, democratic governments.
7. The United States still acts unilaterally to protect its security interests, but has new found respect for the fighting spirit of some allies, the United Kingdom, Canada, France, Denmark, and Australia certainly among them.
8. Iraq has been changed profoundly by its American encounter. It will likely be a continuing American friend in the region. Afghanistan after the US leaves will likely be the Afghanistan we found minus al Qaeda and plus some long runways and some big villas.
9. Conservative politics has changed in America from an automatic support for the military and military options to a growing skepticism that leans heavily toward isolationism.
10. Unresolved after a decade is what to do with captured terrorist suspects. We have not decided on the forum in which they will be tried or the place for their detention. It is a legal and political mess.

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Read more from Harvey M. Sapolsky in his e-IR blog: The High Ground: Observing International Security

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About the author:

Harvey M. Sapolsky is Professor of Public Policy and Organization, Emeritus, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and former Director of the MIT Security Studies Program. He has been a visiting professor at the University of Michigan and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. In the defense field he has served as a consultant or panel member for a number of government commissions and study groups. His most recent books are *US Defense Politics* written with Eugene Gholz and Caitlin Talmadge and *US Military Innovation Since the Cold War* edited with Benjamin Friedman and Brendan Green, both published by Routledge.