

2001-2016: Fifteen years of the “war on terror”

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September marks 15 years since the US state turned the tragedy of the World Trade Centre attacks into a justification for years of brutality and horror inflicted on the population of the Middle East.

The “war on terror”, launched by the administration of president George W. Bush in the weeks following 9/11, revealed the naked barbarity of US imperialism. It extended far beyond the borders of Afghanistan, where the US first invaded, to subject the populations of Iraq, Yemen, Pakistan and beyond to sickening violence.

This war was never about delivering democracy or protecting human rights; it was always about expanding US power. The US state saw an opportunity to occupy and reshape the Middle East in order to control its oil reserves, thereby obtaining leverage against economic rivals and ensuring the future profitability and dominance of the US economy.

The Iraqi city of Fallujah is testament to the human toll of the project. It has been razed three times since the US first occupied in 2003. Once home to a bustling population of 300,000, it was reduced to rubble in 2004, when US troops twice laid siege to the city, unleashing a wave of brutal repression on its civilians. Troops indiscriminately shot and killed protesters, conducted weeks of aerial bombardment and bathed the city in white phosphorus.

Exposure to the depleted uranium employed in US weapons resulted in a fourfold increase in the cancer rate in the years between 2004 and 2010, and a 12-fold increase in cancer for children, according to a study by doctor Chris Busby entitled Cancer, infant mortality and birth sex-ratio in Fallujah, Iraq 2005-2009. Busby’s extensive research led him to conclude that the toxic fallout of the US assault on the city is worse than that suffered by the survivors of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki (another crime of US imperialism).

In 2013, paediatricians at the Fallujah General Hospital told Al Jazeera journalists that, frequently, children were born with birth defects so numerous, rare and extreme that doctors do not even have a medical name for the conditions they cause.

The atrocities once committed by US troops in Fallujah are now being carried out by the client regime it installed after the fall of Saddam Hussein. In June, Fallujah again became the scene of mass devastation, this time stormed by Iraqi government forces and the militias it commands. This time it was in the name of saving civilians from ISIS, a force that arose out of the sectarian divisions stoked by years of US intervention in the region.

Five years after Obama declared the US occupation of Iraq over and troops were “officially withdrawn”, Human Rights Watch reports that Fallujah’s remaining population is currently starving and barely subsisting on date-seed bread and grass soup. Most of its residents have been forced to flee and now languish in refugee camps. In the commemorations for the victims of 9/11, it is unlikely

that the victims of Fallujah will be asked to give their account of the war. Sabah Hassan, an elderly refugee from Fallujah in a refugee camp outside Baghdad, recently told Al Jazeera: "Civilians are the only ones who pay the price of the conflict. What is happening to us is unfair, we have done nothing".

It has not been enough to kill and maim; the US also tried to break a population besieged and terrorise them into subordination. It sought to crush resistance to the occupation by torturing thousands in prisons such as the now notorious Abu Ghraib.

THE DEATH TOLL

In March 2015, Physicians for Social Responsibility calculated that the war on terror has, directly or indirectly, murdered around 1 million people in Iraq, 220,000 in Afghanistan and 80,000 in Pakistan - a total death count of 1.3 million. That is a conservative estimate; the researchers concluded that the real casualty rate is probably much closer to 2 million.

Obama's election in 2008 was promoted as bringing an end to US wars in the Middle East. Instead, the Nobel Peace Prize winning president has overseen a troop influx into Afghanistan and authorised further military operations in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, Syria and Libya, extending the theatre of war and escalating the use of drone warfare.

According to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, since 2002, drone strikes have killed more than 7,000 people. This doesn't take into account drone strikes in Iraq and Syria - which are on the rise as the US seeks to maintain its military presence in the region without the further deployment of troops on the ground.

Despite this expansion, the US has not been able to accomplish its objectives. In fact, after 15 years of war, the US global position is weakened.

WORLDWIDE OFFENSIVE AGAINST CIVIL LIBERTIES

Justifying these crimes against humanity required the creation of a hysterical climate of fear. The stoking of Islamophobia and demonising and criminalising of Muslims have become the key means by which the US and its Western allies excuse both imperialist interventions and a mass offensive against civil liberties.

Guantánamo Bay in Cuba, where the US has detained and tortured accused terror suspects, is the embodiment of this. Within its walls, almost 800 people have been incarcerated. Of these, 674 have never been charged. These people are victims of the war on terror, their lives destroyed by US imperialism.

The Bush administration introduced draconian anti-terror laws such as the Patriot Act - passed in 2001 in part to intimidate domestic opposition to war. Governments around the world followed suit, seizing on an opportunity to increase state powers and further spy on and repress their own citizens under the guise of "fighting terrorism". The Obama administration has expanded the domestic US security state, and rabidly pursues whistleblowers, such as Chelsea Manning, who have heroically exposed the depravity of US imperialism.

INSIDE THE BELLY OF THE BEAST

Capitalism's wars have always gone hand in hand with class war against workers in the belligerent

countries. The war on terror is a case in point. A partial costing by Neta C. Crawford, a professor of political science at Boston University and co-director of the Costs of War project, suggests that to date, the war on terror has cost a whopping US\$1.8 trillion to prosecute.

Meanwhile, since the global financial crisis of 2007-08, US workers have been bearing the brunt of the crisis, even as the Wall Street bankers were being bailed out. As the populations of cities such as Detroit, beset by mass unemployment, are left to rot, and funding for public schools and infrastructure is cut, the US military budget expands. There is always money for imperial slaughter.

RESISTANCE TO WAR

No retrospective of the past 15 years would be complete without also remembering that the war on terror has provoked unprecedented protest. The world's largest single day of anti-war protest that has ever occurred took place in February 2003, before the bombs started to fall on Iraq. All over the world, millions saw through the rhetoric and lies of their pro-war leaders and took to the streets to demand "No blood for oil!"

The largest rallies took place in Europe. In Australia, 250,000 marched in Melbourne, and half a million rallied in Sydney's Hyde Park, with protests also held in almost every other city in the country. These mobilisations were larger than the famed anti-Vietnam War moratoriums of the 1970s.

Despite their size, a few mass protests were never on their own going to stop an empire hell bent on war to enforce its rule around the globe. Bush and his Western cronies were able to dismiss the global opposition to war and bomb and invade Iraq anyway. Nonetheless, the protests indicated the immense capacity of people to show international solidarity in spite of the considerable divide and rule efforts of our governments. They also demonstrate that, for all the horrors capitalism inflicts, people are more than capable of resisting the system. Our rulers can lie, scapegoat and repress, but inevitably the brutality of capitalism, always made most concrete at times of war, inspires rebellion.

More than anything, what the last 15 years of war have demonstrated is that imperialism has to be resisted.

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P.S.

* "Fifteen years of the war on terror". 02 SEPTEMBER 2016:
<https://redflag.org.au/node/5471>