

International

‘Total failure’: The war on terror 20 years on

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NEW YORK: Twenty years ago, US president George W Bush declared a “war on terror”. Today, its failure is undeniable, with jihadist groups both more numerous and scattered more widely across the world. Bush launched the war on terror after the September 11, 2001 attacks in New York and Washington which were plotted from Afghanistan by Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, who was sheltered by the Taleban regime of the time.

The US-led invasion of Afghanistan toppled the Taleban and degraded the capabilities of Al-Qaeda, but it did nothing to eradicate the causes of violent Islamic extremism at its roots, analysts say. “They managed to kill Bin Laden,” said Abdul Sayed, a researcher on jihadism based at Lund University in Sweden, referring to the killing of the Al-Qaeda chief by US special forces in Pakistan in 2011. “But if the goal was to end transnational jihadism, then it’s a total failure,” he said. Today, jihadist terrorism has transformed into a more global threat, posed by disparate groups and individuals around the world.

Rise of IS

Though the United States, and the broader Western world, has seen no attack on the scale of 9/11 in subsequent years, analysts say that should not be used to claim the “war on terror” has been a success. “The objectives that it set for itself were unachievable. Terrorism cannot be defeated. The threat is constantly evolving,” said Assaf Moghadam, senior researcher at the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism in Israel.

The Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) estimated in 2018 that the number of active terror groups was 67, its highest level since 1980. The number of fighters varied between 100,000 and 230,000, a 270-percent increase over the 2001 estimates. A watershed event was the emergence of the Islamic State group in Iraq and Syria which was hostile to Al-Qaeda and whose influence grew as that of the bin Laden network waned follow-

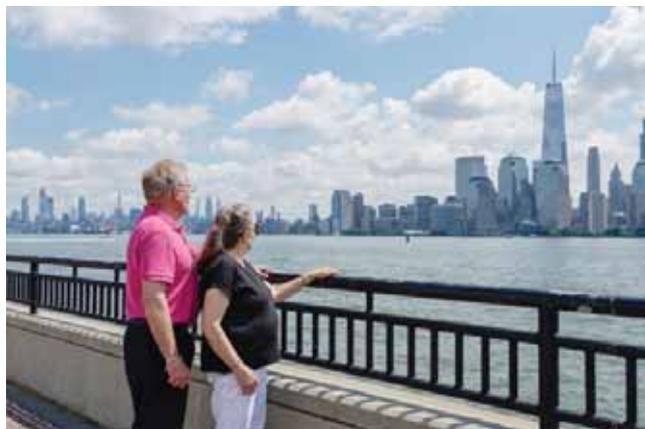
The New York landfill site home to 9/11 debris, human remains

NEW YORK: For some, the hill represents New York’s resilience; for others it’s a gaping wound. Beneath it lies debris, mixed with human remains, from the 9/11 attacks. The site at Fresh Kills on Staten Island was the largest open-air dump in the world until it closed in March 2001. Today it’s a source of consternation for some victims’ families. After Al-Qaeda hijackers reduced the Twin Towers to piles of steel and concrete, the site was reopened so that rubble from the World Trade Center could be sent there. The first trucks arrived the night of September 11, 2001 itself and for ten months, Dennis Diggins led efforts to sift through 600,000 tons of debris from “Ground Zero.”

“I don’t know what it would be like if I had a family member. But I can tell you that the material has been treated with the utmost respect,” he recalls 20 years later.

“It’s not co-mingled with garbage, there’s a separation” ever since it arrived, he adds from the top of the hill which overlooks Lower Manhattan. The area became like a small town with some thousand sanitation employees, police, FBI, and Secret Service agents. They combed the site for clues, valuables and remains that would help identify victims. Kurt and Diane Horning were among victims’ families to quickly visit the area. Their son Matthew was a database administrator who died when the North Tower fell an hour and 42 minutes after it was struck by a hijacked airliner.

They tensed up as soon as they arrived: Mud and seagulls pervaded the



JERSEY CITY: Diane and Kurt Horning, who lost their son Matthew Horning in the September 11, 2001, attacks, look at the New York skyline from the Empty Sky Memorial in Jersey City, New Jersey. —AFP

ing his death. Given the vast resources devoted to it, the outcome of the war on terror has been disastrous, partly due to factors seen by some as major errors, notably the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq that ousted Saddam Hussein. “It did allow AQ (Al-Qaeda) to resurrect itself, which laid the ground for the Islamic State to emerge,” said Seth Jones, director of the international security program at CSIS.

Experts say the strategy relied on head-on confrontation without sufficiently taking into account the breeding grounds of jihadism-war, chaos, bad governance, corruption. “Conflicts like the one in Syria can radicalize and mobilize thousands of militants in a short time period and there is little the outside world can do about it,” said Tore Hamming,

site. They came across a credit card, a shoe, a watch. A worker told them that during the first 45 days, due to lack of equipment, they worked with rakes and shovels.

“The whole idea was get it done under budget, get in time fast, get something new up. We’re going to show our resilience and we’re not going to dwell on the dead, and that’s what they did,” says Diane.

Diggins assures that he and his workers never treated the area like a normal landfill site and operated “with respect.” “You always knew that there were human remains. That never left you,” he says, getting visibly emotional.

Once all the trucks left, Diggins said he even hired divers to search the surrounding wharf to make sure nothing had escaped his men.

‘Garbage dump’

Between the start and the end of the operation, the hill, which offers a breathtaking view of lower Manhattan, where the Towers stood, rose more than 80 feet (25 meters). Separated from the rest of the hill by an insulating layer, the pile of debris was covered by a protective layer of film.

The Hornings believe some of Matthew’s remains are buried there. To this day, only a bone fragment from their son has been recovered. Their attempts to have all remains removed were rebuffed by then mayor Michael Bloomberg’s city government.

“It was a double loss, because, yes, some fanatics decided that this was a good idea and blew up my child. But then my own government decided he wasn’t good enough to bury. So I had a double loss,” says Diane. Horning and other families proposed that the remains be sent to other sites in Fresh Kills that had never housed any trash but they got nowhere.

In 2005, 17 of them started legal action. They tried to take it to the Supreme Court but justices refused to examine it. “I crashed and I felt personally responsible for having dragged the families in. Now they have no



SARASOTA, US: US President George W Bush has his early morning school reading event interrupted by his Chief of Staff Andrew Card (left) on September 11, 2001, shortly after news of the New York City airplane crashes was available in Sarasota, Florida. —AFP

a fellow at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization. “Arguably the biggest problem is not military,” Hamming said. “One of the strongest mechanisms to prevent recruitment to Islamic militancy is providing people better alternatives. Weapons do not do that.”

The nature of the threat has transformed since 9/11 when jihadist terror essentially meant Al-Qaeda under the charismatic leadership of bin Laden. But then IS emerged and various branches pledging allegiance to IS or Al-Qaeda. The geographic spread of the jihadist threat has also changed. The groups were limited to the Middle East but they are now also common throughout Africa, most of the Arab world as well as in South and Southeast Asia. —AFP



NEW YORK: Dennis Diggins, former First Deputy Commissioner, New York City Department of Sanitation, points to a water way used by barge boats to drop off debris from the 9/11 World Trade Center site at the Fresh Kills landfill in the New York City borough of Staten Island. —AFP

hope and I had to live with that,” said Diane.

The site still lets out more than 40,000 cubic meters of methane per day from the decomposing trash brought there over many decades. Once it is safe, New York authorities plan to open a memorial park on the site in 2035.

But the Hornings are not interested. “It’s a garbage dump,” says Diane. “It’s like if on Christmas morning, you handed your child a beautifully wrapped package and when your child opened it, there was garbage in it.” —AFP