

BEYOND THE TOWERS



THE WAR
ON TERROR,
TWENTY
YEARS ON

THE WAR ON TERROR THAT COULD NOT BE WON



HD 4x60'
WildBear Entertainment

9/11 changed the world. A compelling four-part special *Beyond the Towers* tracks the US-led response to the September 11, 2001 attacks in New York City and Washington D.C – and the subsequent unravelling of the Middle East.

Beyond the Towers traces the US quest for vengeance directed against Al Qaeda bases in Afghanistan and against the extreme Islamist Taliban government which had protected them. Over time the Afghanistan campaign evolved into what US President George W. Bush called a global 'war on terror'. Many Muslims regarded 'the war on terror' as a western 'crusade' against the Islamic religion and fought back accordingly.

This four-part series assesses the manner in which the US-led wars were fought in Afghanistan and Iraq, how air power and high tech weaponry were increasingly ineffective as the wars endured in wiping out fanatical jihadists deploying roadside and suicide bombs. The world's strongest military power and its allies won many battles but couldn't hold territories or win the 'hearts and minds' of the people in whose name they claimed to be fighting.

As American and British power and prestige has weakened and moral authority become tarnished, new waves of terrorism have spawned in Indonesia and the Philippines with deadly attacks in many European cities. And extraordinary death tolls have been recorded in Afghanistan and Pakistan, in Iraq and Syria, in Libya and across north Africa. The unintended consequences of pursuing a global war against terrorism have become horrifyingly clear.



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EPISODE 1: VENGEANCE

Within weeks of the 9/11 attacks the United States led an invasion of Afghanistan. Quick, victories – within months routing the Taliban government and Al Qaeda – led to flawed decision-making in Washington. Rejecting advice from military leaders – the administration of President George W. Bush was overly confident that it could control the country with air power and a minimum of ‘boots on the ground’.

Afghanistan, dominated by powerful warlords with private militias, riven by ethnic and religious tensions and corrupted by the opium industry was a mystery to the invaders. The invaders failed to build a stable national government or, over many years, train reliable security forces.

Taliban and Al Qaeda leaders including Osama bin Laden survived the US invasion by retreating across the border to Pakistan. While officially the Pakistan government was a committed partner in the US declared global ‘war on terror’ in fact sections of the army and the powerful intelligence service, the ISI, were committed to defeating the US. They recruited and re-armed foot soldiers for the Taliban. As the United States became ‘bogged down’ in Iraq after the 2003 invasion the Taliban progressively re-grouped in Afghanistan, gaining territory and becoming a constant threat to the Afghan government.

Afghanistan was to become America’s longest war. In 2020 President Donald Trump agreed to a humiliating deal with the Taliban – negotiations from which the Afghan government were excluded – allowing for the US to withdraw its last remaining troops. Afghanistan in 2021 is once again a haven for Al Qaeda, Islamic State and a host of other Islamic terrorist groups. Overall American power and prestige have been diminished by the Afghan war.



EPISODE 2: FIASCO

The 'shock and awe' invasion of Iraq was a stunning success and the US-led occupation a catastrophic failure. The US sacked the Iraqi Army and the governing Baath Party. The loss of central control allowed warring religious militias, criminal and terrorist gangs including Al Qaeda to do their worst. Baghdad once one of the safest capital cities in the Middle East became renowned for indiscriminate killings.

Removing Iraq's veteran dictator Saddam Hussein and his ruling Baath Party unleashed religious hatreds which had been suppressed for decades, upsetting the traditional power structure in the country; the majority Shia Muslims, were now in charge and the Sunnis responded to their loss of power by leading the insurrection against the foreign occupiers.

The failure of the US and its allies, including Australian weapons inspectors, to find claimed weapons of mass destruction – chemical and biological agents and plans for nuclear weapons was a huge blow to the legitimacy of the war and to the reputation of the US throughout the region. Iraq demonstrated the futility of a 'war on terror' and created the conditions for terrorism to flourish.

The big winner of the Iraq war was America's main regional enemy Iran. The Islamic Republic exploited the Shia/Sunni divide sending militias into the Shia dominated south of Iraq, progressively taking over regional and national politics. Only in the northern region of Kurdistan has democratic government prevailed, defeating the US. They recruited and re-armed foot soldiers for the Taliban. As the United States became 'bogged down' in Iraq after the 2003 invasion the Taliban progressively re-grouped in Afghanistan, gaining territory and becoming a constant threat to the Afghan government.

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EPISODE 3: BLACK FLAG

Chaos in Iraq and Syria's descent into civil war in 2011 created the environment in which Al Qaeda was re-born, quickly evolving into an even more destructive killing machine calling itself Islamic State.

By 2013 Islamic State had taken over Raqqa in Syria and the following year big Iraqi cities like Mosul and most of Anbar province, humiliating the Iraqi Army whose soldiers ran away from the fanatical force. IS had former Iraqi Army officers in its ranks directing military strategy. They employed highly mobile units and brutal tactics to seize an area the size of the United Kingdom. Islamic State claimed to represent Sunni Muslims and was in part a reaction to the Shia dominance of Iraq, which flowed from the US-led invasion and toppling of Iraq's veteran dictator Saddam Hussein. Using ultra-violent methods and directing a genocide against non-Muslim minorities like the Yazidi people Islamic State promoted itself on social media, attracting tens of thousands of recruits.

IS was attractive to disaffected Muslims living in western nations and to converts to Islam; here was a movement which declared it would eradicate corrupt governments across the Middle East creating instead a Caliphate in which sharia (religious) law would reign supreme.

US led Coalition forces rushed back to Iraq in 2014 to prevent Islamic State marching on Iraq's capital Baghdad. Coalition air forces, and the Russian air force operating separately, bombed IS units night and day for years. But it was 2017 before IS was finally ejected from Mosul and its remaining fighters forced back across the Syrian border. An estimated 10,000 IS fighters are imprisoned in overcrowded jails and tens of thousands of women and children are detained in temporary camps. Few nations are willing to take back their nationals and the COVID-19 crisis has made repatriation even more difficult.



EPISODE 4: TWIN PILLARS

The US led invasion of Iraq upset the traditional political and religious structures in the country. Neighbouring Iran seized the opportunity to develop enormous power within its former enemy. In less than two decades Iran, which promotes the Shia branch of Islam has built a giant arc of influence from Iraq, through Syria into Lebanon.

For Saudi Arabia, home to Islam's holiest shrines of Mecca and Medina and promoter of the Sunni sect of Islam, Iran's rise has been a strategic disaster. Saudi Arabia, enormously wealthy from exporting oil and gas has used its riches – and good relations with the United States and United Kingdom – to try and contain Iran. This conflict has been most evident in Yemen where Saudi Arabia is trying to restore the government to power while Iran backs the Shia dominated Houthi rebels. The war, now in its seventh year, has created the world's worst humanitarian crisis with millions at risk of starvation.

The United States has a key role in the Saudi/Iran conflict. The US has strongly backed the ruling Saudi royal family despite the lack of democratic expression in the kingdom. Iran, by contrast, has been America's most significant enemy in the Middle East for the past 40 years. The US under pressure from its allies, Saudi Arabia and Israel, has been determined to halt the development of Iran's nuclear weapons program. The Obama and Trump presidencies took wildly divergent approaches to the problem, but the danger of a nuclear arms race in the region remains.

