



## The Legacy of 9/11: National Security in Focus Case Study

On the morning of September 11, 2001, 19 terrorists associated with the Islamist extremist group al-Qaeda hijacked four commercial aircraft.<sup>1</sup> Hijackers rerouted two of the aircraft toward the World Trade Center in New York City, where they were crashed deliberately into the North and South Towers. A third plane hit the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia. A fourth plane, often referred to as Flight 93, was hijacked and rerouted to Washington D.C. Passengers on Flight 93 regain control of the plane after learning about the other hijackings, but the hijackers crashed Flight 93 into an empty field in western Pennsylvania, killing all passengers and crew members on board. The terrorist attacks killed nearly 3,000 people that day.

The Counterterrorism Education Learning Lab defines **terrorism** as the premeditated use of violence or the threat of violence targeting civilians or their property for political, religious or ideological gain. It is a tactic used to create an environment of fear, chaos and intimidation to further the terrorist's objectives.

Al-Qaeda, a **transnational** Sunni Islamist terrorist organization, was designated by the US government as a Foreign Terrorist Organization in 1999.<sup>2</sup> This designation came after a history of attacks against the U.S., including the August 1998 bombing of two American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, and an attack on the USS *Cole* in Yemen in 2000. The goals of al-Qaeda are to overthrow current regimes and expel U.S. and foreign presence in the Middle East – and to ultimately reestablish a radical **caliphate** in the region. Al-Qaeda, founded by Osama bin Laden in the 1980s, gained more notoriety after masterminding the 9/11 attacks.

The lives lost on 9/11 due to the catastrophic terrorist attacks were primarily civilians: everyday people heading to work on a typical Tuesday morning. Passengers on the four commercial flights were prepared to make it to their destination cities to see loved ones, to attend conferences, and to take vacations. Fire department employees and law enforcement officers perished during the attack while fulfilling their duties to rescue and protect people. Decades later, 9/11 first responders and recovery workers continue to die due to illnesses, including cancer, suffered as a result of exposure to various toxins released in the attacks.

Prior to 9/11, U.S. government agencies countered terrorist threats from its traditional **counterterrorism** strategies. These strategies included gathering intelligence, disrupting plots, and conducting criminal investigations that were executed by separate government authorities that sometimes did not communicate with each other or coordinate their efforts. The 9/11 attacks served as a catalyst to overhaul counterterrorism efforts both at national and international levels.

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<sup>1</sup> [The 9/11 Terrorist Attacks \(navy.mil\)](http://www.navy.mil)

<sup>2</sup> <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11854>



Based on recommendations from the 9/11 Commission, several changes were made to improve communication and coordination across all US national intelligence agencies:

New agencies were created, including the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), the Terrorist Screening Center (TSC), and the Homeland Security Council (HSC). In addition, U.S. Northern Command, a combat command focused on homeland defense and civil support, was organized in the Department of Defense.<sup>3</sup> Finally, in collaboration with Federal, state and local authorities, DHS and FBI created intelligence **fusion centers** in 48 states to facilitate information sharing on terrorist threats. The US government also disseminated information to the public about what suspicious activities and behaviors to be aware of, and where and how to report such concerns. As the threat of terrorism continues to evolve, everyone has a role in countering terrorism.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/bushrecord/factsheets/9-11.html>