Definition: war on terror from The Macquarie Dictionary

1. the name sometimes given to the aggressive actions taken by the US and its allies in response to terrorist acts, instigated by the attacks on the US on 11 September 2001; refers especially to the US-led military action in Afghanistan in 2001–02 and in Iraq from 2003.

Summary Article: “War on Terrorism” and Immigration
From The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity and Nationalism

Al Qaeda
immigration
terrorism

The “war on terrorism” led the United States to overhaul its immigration and border policies to prevent future terrorist entry, and some other countries have emulated these measures. The main effects of these new policies have been on temporary, nonimmigrant travel rather than on permanent immigration.

The idea of a “war on terrorism” was first articulated by US president George W. Bush in an address to a joint session of the US Congress nine days after the September 11 attacks in New York and Washington by al-Qaeda operatives. In the speech, President Bush declared a “war on terror” that “will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated” (Bush 2001). While he made no mention of immigration policy in the speech, over the next several years immigration law became a primary tool used by the US government for fighting the war on terrorism. Immigration rules were used to detain and remove terrorist suspects and to impede travel by suspected terrorists or their supporters. The threat of terrorism also become a rationale for tougher enforcement of immigration law against routine violators. These measures led to serious civil rights violations, widespread inconvenience for immigrants and nonimmigrant travelers, and a temporary reduction in nonimmigrant travel to the United States, but had little effect on overall immigration numbers. While no other country embraced these measures to the same degree as the United States, many have emulated features of the post-9/11 US immigration-control system, including fingerprinting of arriving travelers, the use of terrorist and “no-fly” watchlists, and more careful tracking of foreign students.

Immigration policy became a part of the post-9/11 US response for two reasons. First, all nineteen of the 9/11 hijackers arrived in the United States on legal visas, though several were in violation of US immigration laws at the time of the attacks. That led to a focus on weaknesses in US immigration enforcement. The 9/11 Commission Report noted that “For terrorists, travel documents are as important as weapons” (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States 2004: 384) and argued that border entry procedures should be used to halt terrorist travel. In the several years following the 9/11 attacks, the United States took many measures designed to prevent entry by would-be terrorists. These included improving security of passports and other travel documents; overhauling the visa process by requiring more interviews and more detailed background checks on many applicants; developing and sharing large databases of those suspected of terrorist or serious criminal

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activity; and fingerprinting most arriving travelers to verify identity and check against those lists.

The second reason immigration policy was used in the war on terrorism is that US immigration laws allow for detention of suspected violators, often for lengthy periods, without the constitutional protections for those accused of criminal violations. Immigration-law violations became the favored tool for US authorities to imprison non-US citizens suspected of involvement in terrorist activities. John Ashcroft, attorney general under President Bush, called it the “spit on the sidewalk” strategy in which “we made full use of violations of the immigration laws as a means to freeze people about whom we held suspicions” (2006: 124).

Ashcroft’s approach was highly controversial. Individuals were in some cases jailed for many months or even years on minor immigration violations. Benamar Benatta, an Algerian accused only of immigration-law violations, was jailed for almost five years before being extradited to Canada. A Justice Department inspector general’s report concluded that such abuses were widespread. The border security measures also reduced travel to the United States for several years after 9/11. Foreign student numbers, for example, dropped slightly due to difficulties faced in acquiring student visas to attend US universities. The number of nonimmigrant visas issued fell sharply from more than 7.5 million in the year prior to the attacks to fewer than five million by 2003, before gradually recovering. Overall immigration to the United States did not decline, however, with both legal and unauthorized immigration remaining robust until the deep US recession of 2009.

The war on terrorism also produced broader changes to US immigration law. The United States’ concerns over terrorism rose at precisely the same time as rising illegal immigration, particularly from Mexico. The fear of subsequent terrorist attacks became a rationale for expanding immigration enforcement, including a doubling of border patrol guards, the construction of hundreds of miles of fencing along the Mexican border, and record levels of deportation of unauthorized migrants. While the United States has attempted to mitigate the most disruptive impacts of the post-9/11 border entry regime, it has not rolled back those measures and is considering further ones such as a biometric exit system for departing as well as arriving travelers.

While many countries were initially critical of tighter border restrictions as a response to terrorism, many have followed the United States' lead. Dozens of countries now require the use of fingerprints to improve passport security and record entry by immigrants and nonimmigrant travelers. The International Civil Aviation Organization has developed international standards for secure passports. The European Union, most of its member states, Canada, and others have generated their own terrorism watchlists of individuals who should be denied entry. Canada has also created a “no-fly list” of individuals who should be denied aircraft boarding. The identities of individuals on these lists are routinely shared by law enforcement agencies.

SEE ALSO: Immigration; War and Nationalism; World Conflict; Xenophobia

REFERENCES

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