

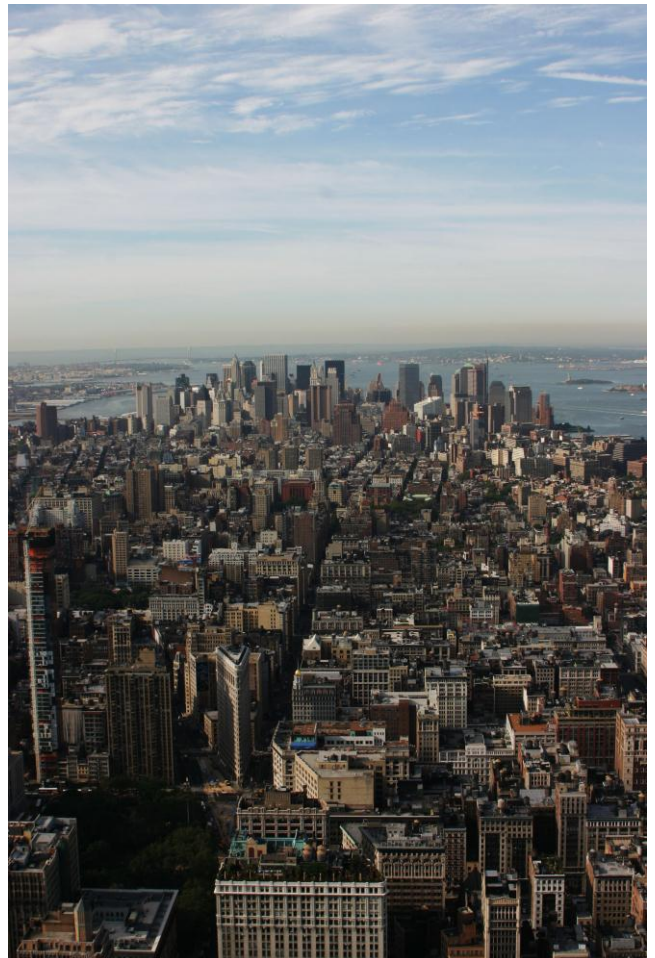
● The geography of 9/11

Did 9/11 change the world? A special themed section of one of the Society's three flagship academic journals *The Geographical Journal* sought to address this very question in a series of specially commissioned essays. Editor of the journal, Klaus Dodds, Professor of Geopolitics at Royal Holloway, University of London, looks at the issues raised in some more detail.

The audacious and dramatic attacks on New York and Washington DC on 11th September 2001 revolutionised understandings of terrorism. What was new was not so much the use of terror rather it was the scale and location. Using commercial airliners as 'weapons of mass destruction', nearly 3,000 people were killed in the iconic World Trade Centre and the Pentagon.

The geographies of 9/11 involved more than two US cities. A third plane crashed in a field in Pennsylvania and might have been heading towards Congress or even the White House. Initially stunned by the assault, the George W Bush administration quickly identified the Al-Qaeda terror network with their bases in Afghanistan as the likely perpetrators. By October 2001, a 'war on terror' was unleashed and US and allied forces were dispatched to Afghanistan. UN approval was forthcoming but later proved problematic. Two years later, Saddam Hussein's Iraq was enveloped in the war on terror despite having no formal connection to the planning and implementation of 9/11. And captured illegal combatants were subject to extraordinary rendition involving a network of secret bases and detention centres.

The fear of terror, and specifically a possible repeated attack, led to the domestic life of the US and other states including Britain being subject to new legislation regulating the lives of citizens and strangers. Public buildings were surrounded by anti-terror obstacles and surveillance enhanced. Despite additional security, terror attacks in Madrid, London, Bali, Casablanca and less publicised cities and townsthroughout Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan highlighted the terrible and on-going human costs of terror and counter-terror. Even the killing of Osama Bin Laden, the 'evil genius' of Al-Qaeda, earlier this



New York skyline © Lis Parham (2008)

year offers no guarantee of a 'closure' for the US government

Geographical research into 9/11 and the war on terror has highlighted its complex geographies. 9/11 did not come out of *nowhere*. It may have shocked Americans but it owes its origins to a series of events and places stretching from Afghanistan, the Arabian Peninsula, Lebanon and East Africa. And as the war on terror unfolded, an ever-greater number of places were drawn into its orbit including a bewildering number of sites involved in extraordinary rendition flights. Moreover, as the Arab Spring reminds us, western support for regimes across the Middle East and Islamic World was initially strengthened as collaboration was prioritised both in intelligence



matters but also with continued resource access, especially to oil.

Taking a longer and broader view, however, we might question a widely held view that 9/11 really changed the world. Perhaps what 9/11 represented was a moment for geopolitical action in key arenas. 9/11:

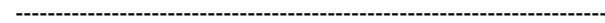
- Provided an opportunity to intensify existing trends including surveillance and public order management. The US Patriot Act (of 26 October 2001) initiated a new era of ever-greater appraisal of the lives of domestic citizens. Muslim and Arab-American citizens were subject to greater scrutiny and intimidation in some cases.
- Provoked an intensification of homeland security projects, which were already in process such as security barriers and walls across the world. A host of other countries including Israel used the war on terror to justify their own localised security projects. Homeland security infrastructures remain in place.
- Acted as a catalyst for geopolitical opportunism. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 was perhaps the most egregious example but it also led to renewed intelligence and security contacts with a host of regimes such as Libya.

- Reinforced a long-standing trend by western governments to support regimes throughout the Middle East and Islamic World on the basis of what they could offer in terms of intelligence gathering and resource access regardless of their democratic and human rights credentials.

For geographers, there remains much work to be done tracing through how places and people continue to be caught up in the aftermath of 9/11 and its legacies. The war on terror might sound abstract but it continues to have geographical consequences – at its worst people continue to die from drone attacks in Pakistan and suicide bombings in Iraq at its best it might have played a part in helping to provoke protestors to take to the streets in 2011 to overrun corrupt regimes in the Middle East complicit in supporting the war on terror.



- [Professor Klaus Dodds, Royal Holloway, University of London](#)
- [Geographical Journal special edition, September 2011](#)



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