



## British Public Perception towards Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq

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**Abstract** *This article seeks to explore the perception of the British informants regarding the Afghanistan war 2001 and Iraq war 2003. Heavy users of British media were interviewed. The present article adopts the qualitative approach and ten in-depth interviews were conducted by the British informants. It was found that the British informants considered the 9/11 attacks as a tragic incident and Al Qaeda was held responsible for this. They supported their government's policies to curb terrorism but they highly condemned human casualties during the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. Particularly, they condemned their government's policy about Iraq war 2003. Regarding, the British media coverage of these wars, there was mixed opinion. Some of them considered that British media gave biased coverage to the wars however; few thought that media adopted a balanced approach. Overall, they stressed that the government should take responsible action against terrorism and human casualties should be avoided.*

## Introduction

September 11 attacks were immensely covered by the world media. The electronic channels reported the images of tragedy, popular personalities and the physical destructions (Monahan, 2010). Within a few hours of the tragedy, the TV screens were loaded with images of terrorist attacks. The TV channel and radio stations from all over the world gave immense coverage to the crisis (Monahan, 2010).

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Many studies illustrated that after the September 11 attacks the people moved towards media for getting the latest information (Abel, Miller & Filak 2005).

After September 11 attacks US President announced their policy against terrorism which was popularly known as “war on terror”. In its first, Americans attacked Afghanistan on 7 October 2001 and secondly Iraq was attacked on 20 March 2003 (Rose, 2002). The basic objective of these wars was to struggle against terrorism. In Afghanistan, from October 2001 to March 2002, there were almost 3400 civilian casualties were noted by the US army military actions (Herold, 2002). However, the US media gave limited coverage to civilian casualties and destruction in Afghanistan, they were more focused on pro-war justifications (Traugott & Brader, 2003).

In March 2003, the US forces along with Briton and other allies attacked Iraq in the pursuance of weapons of mass destruction. Moreover, Saddam was declared a global threat. Vice-President Cheney argued that the conquest of the Iraq war would help to fight against terrorism (Cheney, 2003). This time, the US did not have strong support from all over the world. The US started a war with the coalition of 48 countries and most prominent of these countries were Spain, Italy, and Briton (White House, 2003). Certain countries opposed the war such as China, France, Germany, and Russia (Quille, Gasparini, Menotti, Manaco, Valasek & Bayles, 2005). But President Bush continued their military campaign in Iraq and did not consider the opposition of these countries.

### **British Government Policy relating to the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars**

The British government had followed an activist foreign policy by having a strong relationship with the US, implementing interfering tactics and being dedicated to the UK dominating all over Europe since 1997 (Lunn, Miller & Smith, 2008). During the Afghanistan war 2001 and Iraq war 2003, the Briton supported America by providing them Tom-a-hawk cruise missiles, refueling of US jets and special British forces participated in Afghanistan. Moreover, UK investigation plans provided intelligence information to the US army. From a diplomatic perspective, Tony Blair played a crucial role in the United States. He visited many countries and tried to convince other countries for Bush’s military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq (Golino, 2002). Briton was a major ally in the war on terror as Meyer (2005) noted that after 9/11 the US military officials discussed the issue with the British ambassador and they wanted British support. In response, the British government supported the military action in Afghanistan and Iraq. Even the British Prime Minister, criticized those countries that opposed the war.

From the perspective of public opinion, it was noted that initially European people believed that war against terrorism will kill those terrorists who were dangerous for the world. As Golino (2002) noted in his study that 62% of Germans supported the war against Afghanistan. Likewise, there was the same opinion in

the UK and France and Germany. But with time, as civilian casualties grew in Afghanistan, the public expressed their concerns against it. Public support started to decline in the UK, France, and Germany (Golino, 2002).

### **British Media Coverage of the Wars**

After, the September 11 attacks, it was a significant news story for the British media. It overwhelmingly condemned the devastating incident. After these attacks, the declaration of war on terror by the US was massively supported by the British media. Many justifications and assumptions in support of war were borrowed from American journalists. In the UK, September 11 attacks were portrayed as an “act of war” rather than a terrorist incident. BBC framed the incident as “Attack on America” (McNair, 2010). The next day to the incident, the British newspapers were flooded with the stories of the 9/11 attacks (Kennedy, 2001). Greendale argued that the British media framing for the US as one of us’ was the most notable feature (Kennedy, 2001). On September 12, 2001, the British newspapers published the following headlines;

War on America (*Daily Telegraph*)

War on the World (*Daily Mirror*)

Declaration of war (*Daily Express*)

During the war on terror, the British government forced the media to adopt a pro-war stance (Franks, 2003). Due to this, many UK Muslims did not trust UK coverage of a war. Robinson, *et al.* (2009) narrated that during the war on terror, British media followed official guidelines which framed the war in favor of British government policies. The Glasgow University Media Group (1985) noted that the UK press had been patriotic, obedient and cooperative during the war of Falklands in 1982.

At certain points, British media gave balanced and neutral coverage as well. Unlike the US media which completely framed the wars in favor of their government policies. Papacharissi and Oliveria (2008) analyzed the coverage of British and American newspapers regarding the terrorist attacks. It was noted that the US newspapers stressed on military aspects, political statement and excluded the coverage regarding diplomatic options on the crisis. However, the British newspapers discussed the viewpoints of all international players, alternative strategies and diplomatic decisions. They argued that the government policies of these countries affected the coverage of any issue. Although America and Britain were involved in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, it was noted that British media talked about military and diplomatic options whereas American media always stressed military strategies.

### **Public Perception regarding the Afghanistan war 2001 and Iraq War 2003**

There were enough surveys and opinion polls that were conducted to gauge public opinion about the Afghanistan war 2001 and Iraq war 2003. There was mixed opinion noted regarding the war. At the start of the Afghanistan war 2001, the Western public supported the war but with time, people expressed critical viewpoints. Newport (2001) reported that the media gave negative coverage to the Afghanistan war. The news stories focused on lack of progress, civilian casualties and Taliban were framed strong in their positions. However, very few American casualties were reported. Similarly, the public continued their support for the war. A Gallup poll observed that 88% of the public supported the war which was published by CBS and the New York Times on October 26, 2001.

Later on, Pew Global Attitudes Surveys, (2007) found considerable opposition to the NATO military action against Afghanistan. The survey conducted in 47 countries and only two countries namely Israel (59%) and Kenya (60%) supported to keep troops in Afghanistan. However, 41 countries out of 47 stressed to withdraw the army from Afghanistan. Similarly, another survey conducted by the Pew Research Centre's Global Attitude Project (2007) showed that 32 out of 47 countries wanted NATO troops should come back from Afghanistan.

Another survey conducted by BBC NEWS\_UK (2008) found that the majority of public opinion in Australia and Briton stressed that their troops should come back from Afghanistan. Similarly, seven NATO countries also supported the troop's withdrawal from Afghanistan (BBC NEWS\_UK, 2008).

Later, in 2009, Americans also criticized the after-effects of Afghanistan war 2001 and stressed to call back troops to homes. According to CNN-opinion Research poll, (2009) found that 58% of Americans opposed the war and 39% of people supported it. The Afghanistan war also became an unpopular war as Iraq war 2003.

However, during the Iraq war (2003), Rosentiel, and Keeter, (2007) observed that four years after the launch of the Iraq war, the public opinion regarding war started to change. The Americans expressed a negative opinion towards war and did not support the use of military force against Iraq. They thought that war was not going well and America should bring their forces back. However, during the start of the Iraq war in 2003, the American public backed their government stance.

According to Agence France Presse (2003), British public opinion was more critical to the Iraq war as compared to Americans. However, other European countries expressed a more negative opinion about the war. At the start of the war, almost 50% of the public opinion supported the war. The media showed the images of Saddam statue tumbling down and the photos of cheerful Iraqis. The media adopted this policy to cater to public support for Blair's policy towards the war. But it was noted that in British media there was an open confrontation between the proponents and opponents of the war.

Dahlgreen, (2015) compared the British public opinion towards the Iraq war from 2003 to 2013. He argued that in 2003, the British people were in support of Blair's policy towards Iraq. The polls conducted during that time reported that almost 54% of British people supported the US and UK decision for war. But after ten years, the people started to think differently and now only 37% of the public believed that military action against Saddam was right.

By reviewing the previous literature, it was noted that the Western public had mixed opinions towards Afghanistan and Iraq war. With the passage time, their support for these wars started to decrease. These studies were mainly based on surveys and opinion polls. There were limited studies were conducted through a qualitative approach. To fill this gap, the present study would explore the opinion of British informants regarding this war through in-depth interviews. For this study, those individuals were selected who were users of British print media and electronic media. In this way, the study would explore what was the public perception in Britain regarding the Afghanistan and Iraq wars.

## **Methodology**

This study is based on a qualitative research design. For data collection, the researcher used the methodology of in-depth interviews. Through in-depth interviews, the researcher could gather in detail and comprehensive data. The interviewee is allowed to describe his feelings, opinion and personal experience related to the phenomenon. Through in-depth interviews, it could be investigated how people perceived the world and happenings around them. For the present study, ten in-depth interviews were conducted from British informants which explored what was their opinion regarding the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. It was sensitive in Britain. It was difficult to get a detail opinion from the people on the issue. Previously, researchers adopted a survey methodology to gauge public opinion which did not give in-depth information about the issue. Their interviews were analyzed through thematic category analysis. The results described different themes on how the British respondents observed the wars.

## **Informants**

This study selected ten informants from Britain. For this study, the selection criteria were that the informants should be educated, heavy users of electronic and print media of their country and well informed about the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. From February 2013 to March 2013, these interviews were conducted from Britain. This study employed the technique of snowball sampling which helps to locate information-rich informants as referred by Berg (1988). These informants were selected from Birmingham and London. They mainly belong to the middle class and upper-middle of their society. By profession, they were communication

experts, journalists, doctors, educators, and executives. These informants had a keen interest in international affairs, current affairs, British foreign policy, British media and political affairs of their country. Moreover, these informants had valuable information regarding the issue of terrorism, wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. When it was asked from the informants from where they got information mostly? They thought that they regularly read British newspapers such as The Guardian, The Independent, Daily Mail, the Times and watched electronic news channels such as BBC, Sky News, ITV channel, etc.

### **Interview Protocol**

The informants expressed their opinion in the English language. These interviews were conducted through Skype. The interview was based upon their perception regarding the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The researcher intended to explore that the British informants who were heavy users of British media what was their opinion regarding the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. During February and March 2013, the interviews were conducted from British informants. The researcher asked them how they thought about Afghanistan and Iraq wars, their opinion regarding British government policies relating to these wars, the British media role during these wars, the impact of war in terms of physical and material losses, terrorism, Saddam Husain and Taliban.

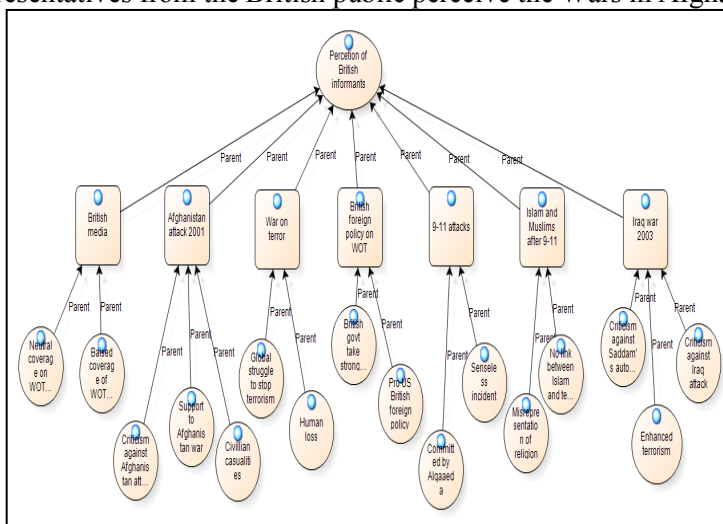
### **Data Analysis**

This study employed the technique of thematic category analysis for analyzing the interviews from the informants. In this technique, the themes emerged from data inductively and the researcher did not require to adopt other external themes. This study used NVIVO 10 for analysis of the data. In the first step, it was required to transcribe the entire interview, so that the researcher could better understand the data. In the second step, the researcher started to read each interview and identified the initial codes from the data. After completing initial coding, the researcher re-examined the data, so that further information could be taken from it. In the next step, the themes that emerged from the data were organized into similar categories. In the last step, these themes were re-evaluated and related description was narrated. The researcher re-evaluated each theme with the original data so that relevant information or theme should emerge from the interviews. These inductive themes answered the research question of the study.

### **Findings**

In this research, interviews were conducted with the informants of the British public regarding their opinion on the War on Terror. These people watched their

mainstream media and observed the Afghanistan war 2001 and Iraq war 2003. It was important to know the country whose state decided to support the war on terror and their media adopted the pro-war stance, how its public looked at the crisis. There were ten informants selected from Britain. They mostly belonged to London and Birmingham. Their age was between thirty to fifty years old. They belonged to the upper-middle-class and the middle class of Britain. The informants were chosen for their special interest in the concept of the War on Terror, international politics and interest in their mainstream media. Through in-depth interviews with the informants, it was tried to answer the following research question: How did the representatives from the British public perceive the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq?



**Figure 1: Thematic Model on the interviews of British informants**

Sub-themes appeared from the data were concerns against Al-Qaida relating to 9/11 attacks, casualties in Afghanistan and Iraq, mixed opinion on the war on terror, human and physical loss during wars, misrepresentation of Islam, criticism against Saddam, the role of British media during these wars and pro-US British foreign policy on the war on terror.

### **Reaction to Afghanistan war 2001**

The first theme that was appeared from data was informants' reaction to the Afghanistan war in 2001. It was observed that most of them did not support the action against Afghanistan. They framed the action as retaliation in response to the 9/11 attacks. One of the informants argued that he did not believe that war could solve any problem. It was also stressed that there was no certainty that it was Afghanistan that was responsible for the 9/11 tragedy although intelligence

agencies made their case against Afghanistan. The informants thought that there should be some other ways to bring the perpetrators of 9/11 to justice. War was not the way. If America wanted a change of regime in Afghanistan, it was also not the solution to the problem. The mind of the people could not be changed through war or force. The resentment against the West would increase in the region. One informant stated that it would be a waste of life on both sides. The British framed the Afghanistan attack as retaliation and poorly conceived action. The attack would kill innocent people who did not commit any crime.

However, it was noted that there were a few who supported action against Afghanistan. They thought that the 9/11 attacks were highly emotive and the United States should respond against it. If the Government had sufficient evidence against the culprits, it should go for action. Although war caused the loss of life these acts of terrorism could not be ignored. To prevent such attacks in the future, the Government should take some action and if military force was required, it should be used appropriately.

### **Reaction to Iraq war 2003**

The other theme was informants' reaction to the Iraq crisis of 2003. It was observed that the extension of the War on Terror to Iraq in 2003 was not supportive by most of the British informants. They thought that the action against Iraq was based on a pretext and not on solid proofs. The United States Government made allegations that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction that posed a threat to the United States but the weapons were not found after the war. Furthermore, it was not strongly proved before the war. If America wanted a regime change in Iraq, the war was not an appropriate method. The "Man at the Top" should be brought down by his people. As one informant argued:

"The Iraq war was misguided and in the context of the war on terror, wrong. I don't believe it helped in this context and probably succeeded in antagonizing that intent on terrorist attacks even further and helped their cause and was extremely inflammatory...I don't know whether he had nuclear weapons--I believe that no weapons were found when the US invaded so presumably not."

The war did not solve any problem but in fact, it enhanced extremism and resentment against the West. The British informants also doubted the link between terrorism and Iraq. One informant stated that the speculation that the US was rather more concerned with Iraqi oil than with combating terrorism might be true.

Certain informants supported action against Saddam. They stressed that it was a dictator regime. Saddam oppressed his people and committed a crime against the people. After the collapse of his Government, the people would be in a better situation rather than under a dictatorship. Whether he had weapons of mass destruction or not was another question but he threatened to use them and there could be a connection between Saddam and Al Qaeda. Moreover, at that time, the



available information did not support Saddam. Based on these allegations, the action against him was justified.

It was observed that the British informants had quite a negative opinion about Saddam. Sometimes, they did not support the attack on Iraq but they also did not support Saddam. He was framed as a dictator and an extremist who oppressed his people and committed crimes against his nation. One informant stated that if he was not alive, he did not feel sorry for him. Saddam killed many innocent people in his country to prolong his regime. It was also argued that he might have connections with Al Qaeda and he was also in the process of making dangerous weapons. He was a threat to the United States because he threatened to attack the country. Most of the informants expressed the opinion that they did not like Saddam and his dictatorship. Most of the British informants condemned Saddam for his extremist action against his people. However, regarding his connections with Al Qaeda and the possession of weapons of mass destruction, they had mixed opinions. They responded that he might have weapons of mass destruction or have a connection with Al Qaeda but his biggest crime was his dictatorship which caused much civilian death in Iraq.

### **Concerns regarding Human Casualties during the Wars**

The other sub-theme that appeared from the data was the concerns against human loss during the war on terror. The informants argued that these attacks led to a greater human loss in Afghanistan. Many innocents who were not responsible for the 9/11 attacks were killed. One informant commented that the 9/11 attacks were the reaction to the bellicose policies of the United States against the Muslims. Another informant argued that it was Islamic extremism and American foreign policy which led to these attacks. However, few expressed that there were some unknown factors behind it such as greed or retaliation. Overall, the British informants framed the 9/11 attacks as a senseless incident that led to many casualties including many innocent people in the United States and Afghanistan. The British people were much concerned regarding the civilian killings in Afghanistan and Iraq. They condemned the killings and felt sorry for these innocent people and children who were killed in this war. They argued that the war caused massive physical and property damage that could not be justified. They considered it a terrible human and property damage. Although one informant argued that there were fewer civilian killings during the War on Terror and more willingness to rebuild the country's most of them considered it a great loss.

“There has been a huge loss of life and infrastructure to thousands of innocent people which will take years to rebuild however these are the consequences of war. It is very saddening that so many people have been forced to move house or even country to flee the violence, unfortunately, a few individuals have had a huge impact on so many people.”

Regarding the War on Terror, the British informants thought that it was a global struggle to stop international terrorism. Through this war, the United States and British tried to capture those groups or individuals who were involved in the September 11 attacks or intended to commit further attacks against Western nations. It was a struggle to resist fundamental ideals, terrorist actions, and dictatorship that caused harm to innocent civilians. It was also argued that these extremist groups were not confined to Al Qaeda alone. They were wide-ranging and had spread to many other countries. The British people were convinced that it was an international effort but some were against the war. They considered it vengeance and retaliation. As another informant commented:

“This is a global strategy to try and prevent international terrorism. Ideas that come to mind are the US and Islamic Extremists”

One British argued that the War on Terror was ‘another war’ and innocent people were caught up in this. It would cause miseries for those who were not involved in the September 11 attacks. British informants supported the idea of War on Terror and were agreed that it was a struggle to prevent further attacks against the innocent civilians but at the same time, they had certain reservations regarding the strategies of the War on Terror that might lead to further human killing.

### **British Policy relating to the Afghanistan war 2001 and Iraq War 2003**

The other sub-theme was relating to British foreign policy on the war on terror. The informants were asked to comment on British policy regarding the War on Terror. The majority of them did not endorse the government’s policy to support the War on Terror. They thought that the British government was not in a position to stand against the policies of the United States. The United States policymakers provided false intelligence and compelled the British Government to support them. Britain did not want to spoil its relations with the United States, so they supported them. Another informant commented that the United States had its priorities, policies, and egotism that were different from British interests. The British Government should take steps to safeguard its citizens against the threats of terrorism but it should be done through global consensus and mutual understanding, not by supporting all US policies. The British Government should be strong enough to take a stand. Moreover, by supporting the policies of the United States the British government did not get favors from the rest of the world. A few interviews commented more harshly on British-US relations, as they stated:

“I think they say ‘jump’ and we say ‘how high’ (hope you understand that??) In other words we are just America’s ‘poodle’ we just do as they say”

“We are their bitch, we stand tall to their demands and deliver what they ask...they ask us to jump, we ask how high!?”

However, few supported British policy over the War. They said that it was important for Britain to take some action against terrorism. The country could not

stand back silently. It should play a more proactive role. Britain also faced the threat of terrorism in the form of the London bombings. It was pertinent to take action against terrorism. They also looked at the issue from a UK-US relations perspective. They thought that since the US and UK had strong relationships Britain could not retreat on this issue.

### **Role of British Media during the Wars**

The other sub-theme was the role of British media during the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. It was noted that regarding the coverage of the Wars the informants had mixed opinion. Almost half of the interviewees thought that their media was biased on the coverage of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. They projected biased news and gave one-sided coverage; neglecting the point of view of the other side. They also said that the reporting was sensational and of the nature of propaganda that aimed to fascinate the readers and enhance their financial interests. An interviewee remarked that he did not come across any balanced reporting on Afghanistan and Iraq issues. Contrary to this opinion, the others remarked that the British press was the freest in the world. The press was not afraid of tackling British politicians. It reported fairly on the issue but at certain points, it was a little biased on the question of British soldiers; that was acceptable. Overall, they covered the war neutrally from the British perspective. However, one interviewee was quite neutral regarding the role of the British press. She thought that at the start of the campaign the British media was quite balanced in its approach and report all happenings on the battlefield. But with time, the British media lost its neutrality and started to project the point of view which was suitable for them. Overall, it could be stated that generally, the informants were not satisfied with the role of the British media in the coverage of these wars.

### **Perception regarding War on Terror**

The last theme was the informants' perception regarding the war on terror. It was asked of the British informants if the War on Terror curtailed terrorism. There was mixed opinion about it. Some argued that the War on Terror did not curtail terrorism; in fact, it enhanced terrorism. It was propaganda of the British and the US Government to divert attention from other important issues. But they condemned terrorism and argued that it was bad to kill innocent people under the cloak of religion, greed or power. One interviewee stressed that there should be a threat of retaliation against any terrorist attack that might prevent further attacks but every group was not justified to take retaliatory actions. They stressed that the War on Terror did not work to stop terrorism but it should be stopped.

Contrary to this, other informants thought that the War on Terror certainly curtailed terrorism. Now security was increased, the forces had killed many

terrorists, many terrorist leaders were arrested and people were more aware of security measures. Special security units were established that worked to curb terrorism and uncovered certain terrorist plots before a disaster happened. But there was a need for the Government to focus on the causes of terrorism. It was more important to win hearts and minds than to get war victories. One informant argued that in this regard media should play a more positive role. Media should not use the War on Terror for selling their newspapers. There was a more critical and serious approach that was required of the Western media.

## **Discussion**

The present study investigated the opinion of British informants regarding the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. It was noted that British informants viewed the 9/11 attacks as a tragic event and held responsible Al Qaeda or Islamic extremists for this atrocity. Regarding the War on Terror, it was observed that British informants considered it an action against terrorism. They also stressed that the war would crush terrorism but it was more important to root out the causes of terrorism.

Similarly, regarding Afghanistan and the Iraq wars, the informants were not much supportive. They thought that the wars did not solve anything. They expressed their concerns regarding increasing civilian casualties and infrastructural damage in Afghanistan and Iraq. The informants were particularly much against the Iraqi war. They did not consider it a justified war but it was noted that they did not give a positive opinion regarding Saddam. British informants framed him as a dictator. However, the British approach was more neutral. They condemned the Afghanistan and Iraq wars but they did not directly criticize America.

Interestingly, it was noted from British informants that they also did not endorse their Government policies on Afghanistan and Iraq attacks. Most were annoyed that the British Government always supported the US policies. However, few informants were supportive of their government's policy. It was noted that British informants criticized those aspects of the Wars that was highlighted by their respective press. However, the British informants expressed their concerns on civilian casualties during the Afghanistan and Iraq wars but they stressed the taking of measures to eradicate terrorism.

Overall, it was noted that British informants, adopted a balanced approach in expressing their views. Although they had serious concerns regarding human casualties in Afghanistan and Iraq they suggested their government take responsible measures to deal with the threat of terrorism. Agence France Presse (2003) noted that the British public adopted a critical stance against the Iraq crisis and expressed their concerns regarding civilian casualties. In short, British informants had certain reservations regarding these wars but they considered it as an action to restrict terrorism.

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