



New report finds US spent \$2.8 trillion on counterterrorism since 9/11

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The United States spent \$2.8 trillion on counterterrorism from 2002 to 2017, or 15 percent of its total discretionary budget, according to a new study.

Nonprofit think tank The Stimson Center found that since 9/11, counterterrorism funding has averaged \$186.6 billion per year. That includes dollars for the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, all government-wide homeland security efforts and spending on international programs and foreign aid.

The report, created because “the United States currently lacks an accurate accounting of how much it has spent on the fight against terrorism,” is meant to help policymakers evaluate whether the country spends too much or too little on the counterterrorism mission, and whether current spending is doing its job, according to the study.

Annual counterterrorism spending peaked in 2008 at \$260 billion, at the height of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In 2017 as war funding declined, that figure was \$175 billion.

Despite this drop, the study found no indication that counterterrorism spending is likely to continue to decline.

In the 15 years after 9/11, “Muslim extremists or jihadis have killed 100 people in the United States, or about six per year. In comparison, [opioid overdose] was responsible for more than 20,000 deaths in the United States during 2016 alone,” the report notes.

Determining whether the expenditures have generated enough benefit to justify their cost is difficult without accurate information about such spending, the Stimson group noted.

Their own calculation is “imperfect,” the report notes, “as it is subject to problematic definitions and accounting procedures,” does not include a full accounting of all foreign aid that might support the counterterrorism mission globally, and excludes classified spending and dollars on dual-use programs in the Defense Department.

Worried by “a variety of weaknesses in definitions, tracking, and consistencies” in counterterrorism spending, the study group recommended a broader set of parameters to make the federal investment “more transparent, to identify gaps and trade-offs, and to permit more useful evaluations of the effectiveness and efficiency of that spending.”

Those include the creation of a clear and transparent counterterrorism funding report; the adoption of a detailed agency-wide definition for counterterrorism spending; building on current accounting structures to anticipate future budget pressures; tying the definition of war spending to specific activities; and passing new legislation that requires Congress to vote separately to approve war-related emergency or wartime overseas contingency operations spending.

The report was largely put together by a six-member group of defense experts, including former Pentagon comptrollers Tina Jones and Mike McCord; former senior director for counterterrorism on the National Security Council Luke Hartig; defense expert Mackenzie Eaglen of the American Enterprise Institute; budget expert Amy Belasco, who has worked in the Congressional Research Service, Congressional Budget Office and Government Accountability Office; and John Mueller with the Cato Institute.