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Since 2002, U.S. has spent \$2.8 trillion to fight terrorism: Report

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Over a 15-year period after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, the U.S. spent a whopping \$2.8 trillion on counterterrorism efforts, a leading Washington think tank said Wednesday in a study that sheds new light on the true extent of American government spending to fight terror.

The report from the nonprofit Stimson Center examined counterterrorism efforts at the Pentagon, State Department, Department of Homeland Security, and other departments and agencies in the federal government. The study looked at direct military spending — such as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and military intervention against the Islamic State in Syria for example — but also took into account efforts to prevent terrorism at home, foreign education programs aimed at stopping the radicalization of young people around the world, and other areas.

The report claims to be the first sweeping look at the total level of counterterrorism spending since the Sept. 11 attacks, arguing that departments and agencies inside the government haven't followed the same blueprint in accounting for their spending and have made it extremely difficult to find an exact estimate.

From 2002 to 2017, the study said, the U.S. government counted about \$18 trillion in discretionary spending. Of that, roughly 16 percent went to counterterrorism efforts — a total of \$2.8 trillion.

Counterterrorism spending peaked in 2008 at \$260 billion, according to the survey. Last year it leveled off at \$175 billion.

The report comes as lawmakers on Wednesday are set to debate a new Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF), which would give President Trump explicit power to continue taking direct military action against the Islamic State, al Qaeda, and other terrorist groups. For the past 15 years, presidents have been operating under AUMFs passed in 2001 and 2002, and critics — including powerful senators of both parties — say those authorizations are outdated and ill-suited for today's global threats, such as the Islamic State.

The Senate Foreign Relations committee Wednesday will debate a new AUMF.

As presidents used past authorizations over the past 15 years, researchers say the federal government failed to keep a detailed account of exactly how much money was being spent on a host of counterterrorism programs. Analysts argue that keeping a more accurate accounting of counterterrorism spending will help decision-makers, especially those at the White House, Pentagon and on Capitol Hill, funnel money where it'll do the most good.

“Key agencies such as Homeland Security and the State and Defense departments are not on the same page when accounting for their counterterrorism programs,” said Mike McCord, who

formerly served as the Pentagon's under secretary of defense (comptroller) and is a co-author of the Stimson Center report.

"This can't help in coordinating our programs across agencies. Neither our leaders nor our citizens can properly assess the cost of our counterterrorism efforts if we don't measure and present those costs clearly. Doing so is a necessary first step toward judging the efficiency or effectiveness of these efforts," he concluded.