

OP-ED

There is no quick cure for terrorism

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There are many things I remember about 11 September 2001.

Like almost all New Yorkers on that day, I remember the crisp fresh air and the blue sky unbroken by clouds. I remember going to work, thinking about the busy day I had ahead of me.

For me, that day was just another day. Another day at work as a human rights activist. And then the first plane streaked across New York's crisp blue sky, flying too near, too low, too fast and too loud.

As I crossed Madison Avenue on my way to work in the Empire State Building I could not begin to understand what that screaming jet above me would mean for my work over the next decade.

Many, perhaps most, New Yorkers were brought together at that moment – across all our usual fault lines – supporting each other in our grief and dislocation. We felt the loss, the disorientation, the desire to return to a time before the world seemed to tumble down.

I walked the streets of New York that day as people searched for those who were lost; as people sought to understand; as shock turned to grief and anger and back again to grief.

What we did not know was that our losses, our anger and our grief would become the justification for a fundamentally flawed concept – a global war on terror – leading to immeasurable harm that dishonoured the grief we felt on that day and continue to feel 10 years later.

As governments began debating how to strengthen their laws to combat terrorism by exploding international humanitarian law principles - basic and essential principles that protect us all from being tortured. Fundamental due process protections were dismantled, exploiting the resulting fear – fear politicians leaped to identify and promote.

And so on this tenth anniversary, I write not just of the memory of that day, but of how governments used the horrific events to exploit the grief and anger to undermine fundamental values, promote fear and divide the world into “them and us”.

When the US decided that torture was justifiable, it turned to its close ally Egypt, knowing that the Egyptian security forces excelled at torture. When the Chinese government wanted to justify its repression of Uighers in Xinjiang, the events of September 11 suddenly applied. European governments supported renditions knowing full well of the risk of torture to those rendered. Political opportunism thrived across the globe in the post-September 11 world.

Amina Janjua from Pakistan is a woman who understands only too well the consequences of these ill-conceived policies. Her husband, Masood, is believed to have been held in government custody since he disappeared in 2005, when he was travelling on a bus to Peshawar. He is among hundreds of people who have disappeared, believed to be held in custody, since Pakistan joined the US-led “war on terror” in 2001.

In the meantime, in Tanzania, India, Spain, Indonesia, Pakistan, the Philippines, the UK, Kenya, Somalia, Iraq, Norway, Morocco, those who support terrorism continued to wreak havoc as they promoted hatred, killed civilians and glorified violence.

It is a cliché to say that the actions of the US government became strong recruiting tools for organizations like Al-Qaeda. Whether or not this is true, the question we must confront is: have governments across the world responded to this attack on human dignity by promoting

the inherent dignity and equality of everyone? Or have they defined a map of the world in which respect for human dignity and life is dependent on one's nationality? One's religion? One's class? One's name? One's immigration status? One's skin color?

These governments in the coalition fighting in Afghanistan tried to gain credibility by claiming that their aim - in part - was to promote women's rights in Afghanistan. But as the war drags on, a willingness to negotiate with the Taleban is emerging posing a real danger that women's rights will become no more than a bargaining chip.

There is nothing simple about combating terrorism. But nor is there anything simple about challenging repression by governments that reduce people to labels that determine whether their rights will be respected.

Terrorism will not be ended by building alliances with governments that rule by fear and repression. This is counter-productive and demonstrates a cruel disregard for the human rights of people suffering from that repression.

We rightly recoil at the loss of lives to terror on and since September 11. We should also be appalled at the loss of freedoms and rights in the name of terror and counter-terrorism in the last ten years.