



What Trump's New Strategy Means For The Middle East

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Earlier this week, in a major address in Washington, DC, President Donald Trump formally unveiled his administration's new national security strategy. That document - the first of its kind since 2015 - lays out a compelling and fundamentally different vision of American security from the one that dominated during the Obama era.

At its core, the new Trump strategy is oriented around four distinct priorities.

The first is protecting the U.S. homeland from an array of contemporary threats, ranging from weapons of mass destruction to extremist ideologies to the growing military capabilities of hostile regimes. To guard against them, the document details, the U.S. will need to deploy robust missile defenses, harden its critical infrastructure, and enhance its border security. But it will also need to wage an extensive and open-ended global counterterrorism campaign designed to root out *jihadi* threats "at their source."

The second focus of the Trump strategy is the promotion of American prosperity. At home, this will require taking steps to protect America's innovation base, to maintain and expand the current U.S. lead in key technologies, and to exploit America's commanding position in the global energy market. Abroad, meanwhile, the strategy makes clear that Washington plans to use its considerable clout to push for a more equitable international economic order.

Third, the new strategy advocates a policy of "peace through strength" to deter and defend against a broad range of adversaries. These include rogue regimes like Iran and North Korea, a variety of terrorist and criminal groups, and rival powers such as Russia and China. Dealing effectively with these forces, the strategy explains, will require allocating greater resources to the U.S. military, as well as preparing to compete more effectively on new battlefields, such as in cyberspace.

Finally, the White House will seek to advance America's influence globally through a range of competitive strategies, from empowering regional partners to assuming a more assertive stance in multilateral forums. Underpinning these efforts, the new document emphasizes, will be a forceful defense of political and religious freedom, as well as a vision of the United States as a "beacon of liberty and opportunity."

What does all this mean for the Middle East? When it comes to U.S. regional policy, these principles are likely to find their expression in at least three concrete ways.

GREATER POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT. Under the Obama administration, the United States assumed an increasingly hands-off attitude toward the region, taking a back seat in the resolution of regional conflicts (like the Syrian civil war) and becoming a bystander to political changes such as those that accompanied the "Arab Spring." The Trump strategy, by contrast, envisions America doing much more. It champions a "realistic" approach that promotes gradual reforms among the region's states, helps to strengthen partner nations, and plays a more active role in regional peacemaking (including in Syria and the Israeli-Palestinian arena).

ENCOURAGING ECONOMIC DYNAMISM. Consistent with the President's background in business, the new Trump strategy takes an unabashedly capitalist tone, championing "the benefits of open markets and societies" for the countries of the region. In many cases, it makes clear, this will mean assisting the modernization of local economies. But it will also require addressing the underlying political and economic inequities that provide fuel for extremist forces. In other words, the Trump White House sees economic security as national security - both for the U.S. and for its regional partners.

A MORE ROBUST FORWARD PRESENCE. America's disengagement from the Middle East under Obama included a retraction of military power from the region - an approach that supporters at the time lauded as a "rightsizing" of the U.S. strategic footprint there. But this constriction came at a cost, with Washington progressively losing the ability to shape regional events. The Trump administration clearly envisions the need for a much more engaged role for the U.S. in Mideast affairs - including greater political and military investments in regional allies, and a more robust on-the-ground military presence - in order to counter violent Islamist organizations and roll back Iran's malign regional influence.

To be sure, none of these changes will take place overnight. Even so, if it is followed faithfully, we should expect the Trump administration's new strategy to yield a very different American presence in the Middle East than the one we have witnessed for the past decade.

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