

# A Consequential Strategy: The “America First” Approach Has Distinct Advantages for the Middle East

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## Brief Analysis

Hovering far above actual policy, national strategy documents are bound to generate multiple contradictory readings and assessments. The most recent strategy papers, released less than a year into the new U.S. administration—and thus, with a limited track record of actions against which to be judged—has been met with the expected range of accolades, dismissals, and denunciations. Yet, far from being a rhetorical endorsement of a populist “America First” electoral slogan, the strategy that the two documents articulate represent, at multiple levels, a clean break with a U.S. posture that had raised the objections and suspicions of many in the Middle East. The instinctive negative reaction in Arab political discourse is, however, a moderate reading of the impact of the new strategy yields a net positive out of a mixed assessment on issues relevant to the region.

The new U.S. strategy acknowledges that Russia, together with China, is once again on the ascendency as a global superpower, and is a rival for the United States. While aspects of the destructive role of the emergent Russia abound in the Middle East, many regional actors have strived to accommodate its rise rather than resist it. Russia has staged a major upgrading of its power of influence in Syria. In fact, it is confirming its role as a contending superpower beyond its near abroad and intervening militarily through an expeditionary force that blatantly supersedes the sovereignty of the regime that purportedly has invited it. Less highlighted is the major information operation staged by Russian media outlets, in conjunction with a wide constellation of broadcast and internet with less evident connection to Moscow, both to enhance the image of Russia in the region, and to inject a wide range of disruptive, factional, and conspiratorial memes across the Arabic cultural sphere.

The acquiescence to the new Russian power was a no minor way due to policies of the previous U.S. administration. Washington effectively abandoned Syria to an aggressive and assertive Moscow, indicating to regional actors that the available approach towards Russia, even from the sole superpower, is a near-submissive reaction. Washington also, seemingly desperately, engaged Iran in a process that included Russia while keeping its long-standing partners in the dark for much of the process and policy rationale. Regional governments, both those with previous connections to the Soviet Union and those who never had deep relations with Moscow, were thus ushered to hedge their bet against a U.S. policy that lacked clarity and strength. Even more dramatically, the Obama Administration seemed adamant to abide by an international legality system that was repeatedly internally subverted, manipulated, ignored, and bypassed by Russia. In Syria, Moscow demonstrated to the Middle East and beyond that it is solemnly capable of

containing and overturning a complex conflict that had eroded and discredited the United States.

Donald Trump, through faults in behavior, is indeed causing damage to the image of the United States in the Middle East and elsewhere. However, far more substantive damage to the status of the United States has resulted from his predecessor, Barack Obama, irrespective of acclaimed eloquence and praiseworthy etiquette. Inappropriate tweets from Trump may stir sensationalism in the media; the repeated policy stances through which Washington under Obama forfeited its leadership and credibility have a more lasting negative effect on both the United States and the Middle East.

Far from a call for isolationism, “America First” is articulated in the strategy documents as an assertive policy stance that does not submit U.S. interests to pre-conceived doctrines that over-ride Washington’s own assessment of policies compatible with its interests and values. This articulation completes an inherent discussion in U.S. foreign policy in the post-Cold War era. In the 1990s, the Clinton administration adopted the overall approach of placing its actions within international legitimacy, while maintaining a space for departure from the international framework as dictated by national interests. The Bush administration reversed the equation, with the focus becoming the unilateral calculation of national interest, with a due allocation to international legitimacy. The Obama administration did not merely seek a return to the Clinton formula but pushed in the direction of phrasing the totality of U.S. international engagement within the international legitimacy framework.

In reality, the Obama approach faced two hurdles that remained essentially unaddressed. The first was that the international legitimacy framework was more conceptual than actual, laden with idiosyncrasies and lacunae, and far from embodying the notions of justice and equity often ascribed to it. There is indeed value in this framework; still, it is best conceived as work-in-progress international governance—not as a binding and supreme world government. The second defect in the Obama approach was that while the United States was presumably willing to submit in word and deed, rival powers opted for words, often defaulting in deeds. Thus, from a Middle East vantage point at least, Russia took advantage of the Obama administration’s self-handicapping, while engaging in its multi-level offensive to reinstate superpower status in the region, and it succeeded.

“America First” is thus the continuation and the conclusion of the U.S. international engagement debate. The totality of U.S. actions is to be phrased in terms of the U.S. national interest, with the international framework to be understood as the structure of coordination and arbitration of policies, not as a higher authority that allows, denies, or sanctions U.S. actions. In light of recent Russian and Chinese obstructionism at the Security Council, and in contrast with the past weak and ineffective U.S. policy that pled the inability to act outside of international consensus, this is a positive development from multiple Middle Eastern perspectives. The strategy documents do not posit “America First” as a sole focus on interests at the exclusion of values. It is instead a realistic, if pessimistic, assessment of the place of values in shaping policy. The counter-proposition had indeed been debunked by Barack Obama himself. His speech—highlighting the exceptionalism of the United States as a nation dedicated to values in its international pursuit—juxtaposed to his absolution of and offer of a path towards cooperation for the Damascus regime—which had just crossed Obama’s own “Red Line” by committing mass civilian casualties through the use of chemical weapons—will remain for Arab political culture a contender to the ultimate in political hypocrisy.

In fact, questions ought to be raised in the Arab world on the record of “value engagement”—through which external actors, Western governments in particular—have sought to empower local forces on the basis of affinities in values. Both excess and deficit have plagued this effort; productive civil society initiatives were often subverted by funding dictating priorities inconsistent with local needs, while backing was often denied to secular and democratic political actors, prejudged as not rooted in their societies, with Islamists conceived as moderates offered enabling support. It is hard to imagine any U.S. government abstaining from meaningful support for a true and credible positive local social force. It may be in the interest of Middle Eastern societies, though, for official Washington not to engage in

speculative assessment of such forces. The recasting of U.S. values as an ultimate red line, and not as a litmus test in political engagement, is in the interest of positive propositions in the Middle East, to emerge, develop, and grow to influence on the basis of native factors.

The real paradigm shift in the new U.S. strategy may be in the demystification of the two central elements in the Middle Eastern political debate: terrorism and Palestine. Terrorism is thus to be unequivocally defeated, but is not viewed as the principal threat to U.S. interests. The strategy points instead to strategic adversaries (China and Russia) and rogue states (North Korea and Iran) as the primary focus. Both Russia and Iran had cynically engaged in inviting the United States to cooperate in addressing terrorism as the main global threat. The new strategy resets the terms of the conversation. By not addressing Hezbollah, or any other Iranian tool and proxy, even in the context of the security concerns of Israel and Gulf allies, the United States denies Iran and Hezbollah the advantage of its intricate albeit not so opaque structure for pursuing regional hegemony, which had served as a shield against direct accusations of interference. Iran, not Hezbollah or any other proxy, will be held accountable for the actions it initiates or enables through them. Even more dramatically, by refraining from addressing the Palestinian question as a fundamental issue, the new strategy rejects the weaponization and the cultivation of the Palestinian tragedy by Iran and other regional foes and relegates the issue to the level of concrete concerns in the reconstruction of a stable Middle East.

The initial declared aims for the policy of the Trump administration in the Middle East had been the defeat of the Islamic State and international jihadists, as well as the containment of Iran. The new strategy expands the reach to the root causes through a characterization of the Middle East issues as part of the global set of challenges facing the United States. While a clear and coherent articulation of U.S. policy on the Israeli-Palestinian question and on Syria remains an important goal for the immediate term, the new strategy offers considerable confidence in the region of a United States that has identified its foes and set the terms of their engagement, with a clear vision of what such engagement entails. Evidently, the restoration of U.S. credibility in the Middle East—and stability in the region as a direct byproduct—is a function of the ability of Washington to translate the strategy into policy. ❖

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