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Trump's Speech in Riyadh Puts Ball Squarely in Court of Muslim-Led Governments to Fight Terrorism

by [Eric Trager](#)

May 21, 2017

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While avoiding his two predecessors' emphasis on root causes, Trump offered help in the form of a new \$110 billion Saudi defense purchase and continued military engagement in the region.

President Trump's [speech to the leaders of 50 Muslim-majority countries](#) in Riyadh on Sunday will be remembered for what he didn't say. Instead of railing against "radical Islamic terrorism," as he did repeatedly on the presidential campaign trail, Trump emphasized the struggle against "Islamist extremism" and "Islamist terror," thereby distinguishing implicitly the Islamic faith from the totalitarian -- and often violent -- Islamist political ideology.

But the President's address reflected a more substantive break. By focusing on Muslim governments rather than people, and by focusing on terrorism rather than the broader conditions of the Middle East that catalyze volatility and violence, he broke with his two immediate predecessors' strategies for engaging the Muslim world.

Indeed, Trump's speech differed from former President Barack Obama's outreach to the Muslim world in both tone and target. Whereas Obama pitched his June 2009 Cairo speech to Muslim publics, notably thanking the "people of Egypt" but not the Egyptian government for hosting him, Trump focused squarely on Muslim-led governments.

He opened with a warm appreciation of his Saudi royal hosts, and then name-checked many different governments for their cooperation with Washington throughout his speech.

Trump also dispensed with Obama's skittishness regarding the word "terrorism." Whereas Obama studiously avoided the term in his Cairo address, apparently believing that this would offend his intended audience of Muslim citizens who saw the term as politicized, Trump mentioned "terrorism" and its grammatical variants 31 times. This made sense, since the Muslim leaders attending Trump's speech refer to groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda as "terrorists." And whereas Obama tried to showcase his respect for Muslims' faith by peppering his speech with Islamic phrases ("assalaamu alaykum") and Quranic references, Trump forwent mentions of Islamic terminology and texts. Instead, he told his audience of Muslim leaders what he wanted them to do, and in the bluntest terms: "A better future is only possible if your nations drive out the terrorists and extremists," he said. "Drive. Them. Out."

Trump's emphasis on counterterrorism, of course, isn't new -- if anything, this has been the animating focus of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East ever since 9/11. But unlike his predecessors, Trump didn't link Islamist terrorism to any specific conditions within the Muslim world. Trump didn't link violent extremism to "colonialism that denied rights and opportunities to many Muslims," or to the "Cold War in which Muslim-majority countries were too often treated as proxies," or to "modernity and globalization" that "led many Muslims to view the West as hostile to the traditions of Islam," as Obama did in his 2009 Cairo address.

Nor did Trump link terrorism to the absence of democracy or freedom within the Muslim world, as former President George W. Bush did repeatedly in the years that followed 9/11. Indeed, Trump's speech didn't include the words "freedom" or "democracy" anywhere. At one point Trump noted the importance of "promoting the aspirations and dreams of all citizens who seek a better life -- including women, children, and followers of all faiths." But unlike in previous presidential addresses on the matter, he suggested no new U.S. policies for promoting this regionally.

This wasn't an oversight. "We are not here to lecture -- we are not here to tell other people how to live, what to do, who to be, or how to worship," Trump said. "Instead, we are here to offer partnership -- based on shared interests and values -- to pursue a better future for us all." Trump's speech put the ball squarely in the court of Muslim-led governments: it's on you, he effectively told them, to fight terrorism, combat extremist ideology and provide a better life for your people so that the terrorists lose.

Still, Trump offered to help Muslim-led governments initiate these efforts. The new \$110 billion Saudi defense purchase that the President announced in his address is intended to help the Saudis defend themselves (and creates American defense jobs, as the President also noted). And the new Global Center for Combating Extremist Ideology, based in Riyadh, represents an indigenous attempt at countering radical Islamist teaching and preaching. Trump also alluded to his administration's attempts to create a broader regional alliance that will "advance security and stability across the Middle East and beyond," though this remains a work in progress.

Can this step-up-and-defend-yourselves! strategy work? There is ample reason for skepticism. Despite many billions of dollars of arms sales and/or military aid to Middle Eastern governments in recent decades, these regimes have been unable to defend themselves against Iranian proxies and Sunni jihadis, and meaningful "interoperability" with American forces remains elusive. And even if American engagement remains more focused on defense relationships and counterterrorism, it will take many years to fully discredit the ideology of Islamist extremism, if this can ever be achieved at all. In this sense, Trump's actions speak louder than his speech: four months into his presidency, troop deployments to the region have increased. And despite his oft-repeated desire to end American wars in the Middle East, the U.S. military bases scattered throughout the Persian Gulf aren't going anywhere.

In other words, the President wants America's Muslim partners to step up, but seemingly knows from his predecessors' experience that Washington's hopes for the Muslim world are often elusive.

Eric Trager is the Esther K. Wagner Fellow at The Washington Institute and author of [Arab Fall: How the Muslim Brotherhood Won and Lost Egypt in 891 Days](#). ❖



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