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## **United States Policy in the Middle East: The Need for a Grand Strategy**

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The first year of the Trump administration has been characterized by the lack of clear policy guidelines vis-à-vis the Middle East. The great hopes that many countries in the region hung on the change of administration and a new proactive president in the White House have slowly been eclipsed by a sense of confusion, given United States behavior that shows little consistency and no clear strategic objectives. At the end of President Trump's first year, there is a need for a US grand strategy for the Middle East.

President Obama, apart from striving for an agreement with Iran, limited his involvement in the Middle East, but was forced to direct new attention to the region due to the Islamic State challenge. In the election campaign, Trump also spoke in favor of limiting United States intervention in various world arenas. However, he too has been forced to confront the spread of Iranian hegemony, continue to fight the Islamic State, and attempt to stabilize Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and Libya.

Consequently, it appears that the US administration has no choice but to continue in the role of the "world's policeman" to protect American interests. In places throughout the world, and particularly in the Middle East, a vacuum is quickly filled by elements working against American interests. Under the previous US administration, the vacuum was exploited by Iran, the Islamic State, Turkey (as a principal supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood), and Russia.

In order to formulate and prescribe a grand strategy for the region, the Americans must first diagnose the situation. The main feature of today's Middle East is the struggle for hegemony between three radical Islamic camps:

- a. The Iranian Shiite camp that strives steadily to extend its influence, establish Islamic regimes in the region, and divide the Sunni Arab world.
- b. The Sunni Salafi jihadist camp, led by the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, which seeks to set up an Islamic caliphate.
- c. The Muslim Brotherhood under the aegis of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who aims for a new-Ottoman empire based on Muslim Brotherhood ideology.

This article presents a number of ideas that can guide the United States when it formulates its strategy toward the region and the respective actors.

**Vis-à-vis the Iranian Regime**

The Iranian regime is working fervently to expand its influence in the region. It can claim several achievements, due to the weakness of the previous American administration, as shown by the nuclear agreement. Thus, the Iranian regime after the JCPOA, while released from international isolation and economic sanctions and not facing any military or internal challenge, has managed to extend its influence to Iraq (a Shiite government) and Yemen (through the Houthis); is in control of Lebanon (through Hezbollah); seeks control of Syria; is undermining Sunni regimes in the region, such as those in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia; and is supporting Hamas and Islamic Jihad in their war on Israel.

President Trump's October 2017 speech on the JCPOA was extremely important. He indicated a change in policy and a deeper understanding of the threat posed by the Iranian regime to the Middle East and to global stability. The US administration, like Sunni Arab regimes and Israel, classifies the Iranian regime as the primary threat in the Middle East and not an element that contributes to regional stability. As such, it is not part of the solution, as the Obama administration saw it, but the main problem. However, to deal with the Iranian challenge and to achieve the objective that President Trump defined in his speech, the administration at this point must avoid considering reopening the nuclear agreement, while adopting an integrated policy of pressure on the regime that forces it to choose between continuing its rogue and subversive conduct, and surviving. Opening the agreement would cause a rift between the United States and its five partners (Britain, France, Russia, China, and Germany) instead of uniting the ranks to exert pressure on Iran.

Re-opening the JCPOA is superfluous mainly because it is already possible to put heavy pressure on the Iranian regime, due to its violation of the Security Council resolution on weapons dissemination, terror, the missile project, and violations of human rights, including the arrest and execution of opponents of the regime. At the same time, the administration must work for closer supervision of the Iranian nuclear project, invest in intelligence, and cooperate with allies, in order to meet the objective defined by President Trump - preventing Iran from achieving military nuclear capability.

**Vis-à-vis the Salafi-Jihadist Camp**

The Sunni jihadists strive to establish an Islamic caliphate, whether sooner, using the Islamic State (ISIS) model of announcing the caliphate and setting up a civilian system to administer the territories it conquers while continuing the military struggle to retain and expand these territories, or later, using the al-Qaeda method of first eliminating Western intervention in the Middle East and toppling the local "infidel" regimes, in order to establish the caliphate after their destruction. These elements must be defeated.

The Obama administration focused on fighting the Islamic State, leading a coalition in the Middle East designed to attack the organization and particularly its territorial assets. The Trump administration continued the attack, and indeed the Islamic State, which has lost most of the territory it seized in Iran and Syria, is close to defeat. But in spite of the anticipated defeat in the field, the Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and radical Sunni ideology will continue to challenge the countries fighting them. The radical organizations may fight from the territorial positions they retain in the Sinai Peninsula, Libya, and Yemen, or by means of terror and guerrilla attacks originating from these areas and from underground terror infrastructures that remain in their hands, particularly in Iraq, Syria, and North Africa. This terror will focus not only on Arab countries but also on the West.

Given its global scope, the war on Salafi jihadist elements requires a concentrated international effort led by the United States, with intelligence, operational, economic, and political cooperation between all the relevant actors, particularly in the Middle East, to defeat them in the territory they control and to frustrate the terror attacks they intend to mount anywhere in the world.

### **Vis-à-vis the Muslim Brotherhood Camp**

President Erdogan supports the Muslim Brotherhood in the Middle East and seeks to reposition Turkey as a neo-Ottoman empire based on the movement's ideology. Under the Obama administration no significant American or international pressure was put on Erdogan, although he acted against American and European interests, by means of:

- a. Economic assistance to the Islamic State through purchases of oil from the organization.
- b. Allowing (and certainly not preventing) the passage of jihadists from all over the world through Turkey, either on their way to join the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, or on their way back to their countries of origin, particularly in Europe, as trained and experienced terrorists. The result was a number of serious attacks carried out by these activists in Europe in recent years.
- c. Allowing and even encouraging illegal migration of Muslims to Europe (refugees and economic migrants) through Turkey, and particularly to the Greek Islands in the Aegean Sea through a Turkish system of human smuggling. Erdogan does not hide his intention to Islamize Europe through demographic change.
- d. Attacking the Kurds under pretense of attacks on the Islamic State or the PKK in Syria, although the Kurds were the main element fighting the organization.

Although Turkey paid no price for this conduct, the United States, together with European countries, can now use its available leverage to pressure Turkey, as a member of NATO and as a country that is economically dependent on trade with them, to change

its behavior. Failure to use this leverage is not limited to continued Turkish subversion, but also directly harms the status and deterrence of NATO and the United States.

### **Vis-à-vis the Kurds**

Had the United States acted as the "world's policeman," it would have stopped Massoud Barzani from going so far on the subject of Kurdish independence, particularly with an attempt by the American administration to dissuade him from holding the referendum. The US failed to prevent the crisis, and today it is clear that not only the Kurds under the leadership of Barzani paid a heavy price for his policy, but as a result of this farce, the status of the United States was also affected, and the Iranian Shiite camp grew stronger.

### **Vis-à-vis Russia**

It is clear that one of the goals of President Vladimir Putin through his proactive involvement in the Middle East in general, and in Syria in particular, is to strengthen the status of Russia as a global power. Nevertheless, Trump and Putin can reach an understanding regarding the division of spheres of influence. For example in Syria, Russian interests are concentrated on the original Alawistan and not on other areas where Bashar al-Assad took control, or in the Kurdish part or eastern Syria – areas more identified with American interests. The division of spheres of influence could be the basis for consensus and understanding, based on a realistic working assumption that it is not possible to reunite Syria. Instead, the idea is convergence in enclaves that are relatively homogenous demographically, such as Syrian Alawistan, Syrian Kurdistan, and Syrian Sunnistan. The United States must avoid neglecting the Syrian arena and letting it become a decidedly Russian/Iranian sphere of influence.

### **Vis-à-vis the Pragmatic Sunni Camp**

The Arab Sunni camp felt abandoned and even betrayed by the Obama administration. The overthrow of President Husni Mubarak, the failure to support President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi against the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt at the start of the counterrevolution, and accommodation with the Shiite camp led by Iran as part of the strategy in the war on the Islamic State all led to a crisis of trust between the United States and those that were until then its natural allies in the region. President Trump reflects a different policy, as shown in his visit to Riyadh in May 2017 and the attempts to provide political, economic, and military support to non-jihadist Sunni elements in Syria, such as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). It is not clear if the policy of supporting non-jihadi Sunnis is continuing. True, since the start of the campaign in al-Raqqa there were signs of increasing American aid, but as the larger battles have died down and perhaps following Trump-Putin understandings on Syria, there are signs that support and assistance are shrinking. This is a serious error. If this is the case, then once again the United States will be seen by the

Sunnis in the Middle East as an unreliable ally, while Putin manages to present himself as a reliable pillar for his allies.

The United States must adopt a clear position in favor of the Sunnis and against the Shiites led by Iran. The positive attempt to support the Kurds in their war against the Islamic State must set an example for similar support for non-jihadist Sunnis. In this context, the United States can obtain help from the Sunni Arab countries, which will act out of their interest in preventing the spread of Shiite, Salafi, and jihadist influence, or the Muslim Brotherhood.

### **Conclusion**

The Middle East as an area with clear American interests on the one hand, and as a complex, volatile area on the other hand, presents the United States with numerous intertwined challenges. Accordingly, the United States cannot allow itself to disengage from the region. The Trump administration must formulate its objectives in the region clearly and thereupon draft a strategy that will enable it to deal with the extremist elements that are undermining stability, while strengthening its allies in the region who can serve as force multipliers against these radical elements.

After eight years of foreign and security policy that weakened US status as a global power, failure by the Trump administration to stand up for its interests and those of its Middle East allies reflects badly on the US, particularly regarding North Korea and Iran. A gap between words and deeds showing unwillingness, lack of determination, and lack of seriousness will further weaken the United States. The attempts by previous administrations to withdraw from the role of the "world's policeman" or to postpone dealing with security challenges prove that over time the challenge only becomes more difficult.

The US administration would thus do well to formulate a grand strategy to meet the interests of the United States and its allies, and the sooner the better.