



GOP Platform on the Middle East Offers Tough Talk, Little Change

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As far as the 2016 Republican Party Platform is concerned, the campaign of the presumptive Republican nominee Donald Trump is nowhere to be found. The hands-off approach led to producing a manifesto that speaks to the traditional rhetoric of the Republican establishment instead of Trump's populist domestic and foreign policy views.

Indeed, the non-interventionist campaign tone was replaced by the traditional “peace through strength” and “world leadership” approaches. The anti-globalization rhetoric became an endorsement of free trade agreements with a set of preconditions that protect US markets. The [platform](#) reads that “the oppressed have no greater ally than a confident and determined United States” in contradiction with Trump's views that Washington can no longer police the world.

The recurring Republican themes of national security and rebuilding the military were prominent, with an argument that there is “no parallel” in history to what President Barack Obama and his Secretary of State Hillary Clinton did “to weaken” the United States. It has also suggested that this weakness “invited aggression” from China and Russia. In another contrast with Trump views, the GOP platform largely adopted the growing anti-Russia attitude inside the US administration, in particular on Ukraine and Eastern Europe, while not addressing at all the Russian intervention in Syria.

On the Middle East, the GOP platform offers a completely different interpretation of recent developments in comparison to the narrative of the Obama Administration. The platform defined three motivations for US policy in the region: “US national interests, the trust of friendly governments and the security of Israel.” However, Republicans see that by departing from these bipartisan policies, Obama has empowered Iran and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

In an interesting take, the platform described the nuclear deal with Iran as a “personal agreement” between Obama and the Iranian government that has no “treaty status” and hence is “non-binding” to the next president. The platform also calls on retaining “all options” in dealing with Tehran. However, it is worth noting that New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani said in his July 18 convention speech that Trump will make sure that a non-nuclear Iran will emerge from implementing this agreement, while the campaign's foreign policy adviser Walid Phares said earlier that President Trump would likely renegotiate the Iran deal.

The GOP platform, in the context of the larger Middle East, noted that the Obama Administration “so mishandled the Arab Spring that it destabilized the entire region,” referring to Syria as an example where Obama “has been unable to rally the world” against Syrian President Bashar Assad. The document reaffirms the Republican intent to “destroy ISIL” without offering any idea of how that objective will be achieved. Republicans also mentioned the need to support the transition to an inclusive “post Assad Syrian government” that respects the rights of minorities. It also calls on the US to create a safe haven in northern Iraq for those who flee from ISIL, however, it did not mention whatsoever the need to have a similar safe haven on the Turkish border with Syria. On Lebanon, the platform mentioned that the 100,000 missiles controlled by Hezbollah should be “isolated and Lebanon’s independence restored.”

The American Middle East Coalition for Trump held a meeting on the sidelines of the RNC convention where its members outlined why they are supporting the Republican presumptive nominee. Beyond the platform, they outline three parallel threats they believe Trump will address: Iran’s regional activities, ISIL, and the rise of Islamists across the region. The members of the coalition also hinted that Trump would support creating a safe haven for Syrian refugees, a point that was not included in the platform.

The language on Israel went through major amendments. The 2012 platform talked about “two democratic states – Israel with Jerusalem as its capital and Palestine – living in peace and security,” and called on Washington not to impose “an artificial timetable” on the talks. However, the 2016 version adapted the content to serve the current interests of the Israeli government. It did not mention any US role to mediate with the Palestinian side as the process should be “negotiated among those living in the region” and affirmed that Republicans oppose any measures “to impose an agreement or to dictate borders.” The platform also rejected “the false notion that Israel is an occupier” and condemned the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement (BDS) as “anti-Semitic in nature.” Republicans called on US Congress to take legislative measures that “thwart actions that are intended to limit commercial relations with Israel in a discriminatory manner.”

Across the convention hall in Cleveland, there were ample signs that the Trump campaign is ready to make the presidential election on November 8, 2016 about national security as ISIL attacks around the world are on the rise and racial unrest is sweeping the United States. The Trump camp aimed to present the Americans with a choice between law, order and safety on one hand, and chaos, crime and violence

on the other hand. The pro-Israel stance in the platform was meant to offer a clear contrast to President Obama's difficult personal relations with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Meanwhile, the Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton's ability to protect Americans was effectively targeted on day one of the convention by highlighting the September 2012 attack on the US consulate in Benghazi when she was serving as US Secretary of State. While these kinds of attacks on Democrats may be effective, as recent polls are suggesting, neither Trump nor his running mate Governor Mike Pence, have a background in dealing with foreign policy or national security issues. Furthermore, they do not enjoy the support nor the advice of the Republican establishment's national security experts who led foreign policy making in the last two decades. The GOP platform offered criticism and tough talk on the Middle East but little change or substance.