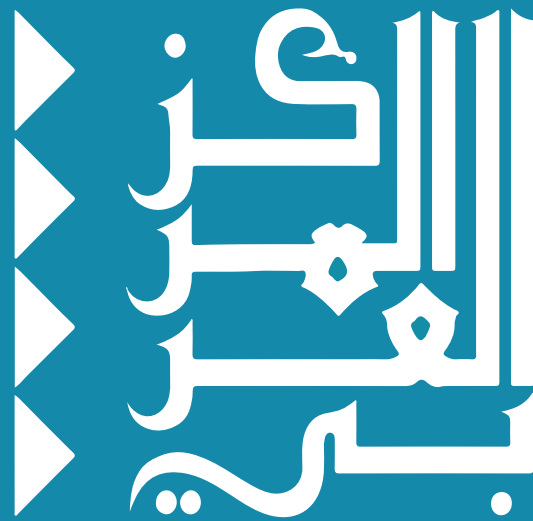


# An Evaluation of President Trump's Emerging Counterterrorism Strategy

Charles Dunne

August 30, 2017



Arab Center Washington DC  
المركز العربي واشنطن دي سي

President Donald J. Trump unveiled America's long-awaited new strategy for Afghanistan in nationally televised remarks at Fort Myer in Arlington, VA, on August 21. The strategy outlined there was the culmination of his general approach to counterterrorism (CT) in the broader Middle East; and approach that has been developing through various policy deliberations since early in the administration.

Broadly speaking, the major elements of the president's approach--at Fort Myer and elsewhere--strongly favors military solutions, albeit with limited troop commitments; the United States, Trump indicated, seeks nothing short of a win, with a clear definition of "victory" mainly as the destruction of terrorist groups. Second, victory does not require "nation-building" and, especially, not the promotion of democracy. In his Afghanistan speech, Trump once again relegated the latter concept to the ashbin of history, as he seems to regard it as an actual liability in the successful pursuit of security goals. Third, the strategy will involve "all elements of national power" and will require US allies to contribute much more, both financially and militarily, not only to the Afghanistan effort but to the much-vaunted war on terror in general. Fourth, the president is committed to an "unpredictable" approach that aims to keep the enemy guessing in terms of troop numbers, operational plans, and timing. To him, the United States will deploy and withdraw forces only as conditions permit, not as a timetable requires.

Such a strategy has great appeal to a president who is enthralled by the US military, and to a public that likes to "win" but is weary of open-ended troop deployments abroad. But will it work in a region with complex and contradictory politics, dubious allies, and longstanding cultural, religious, and ethnic differences and disputes?

### **The Trump Approach – a Work in Progress**

A draft of the counterterrorism strategy the administration plans to release in coming months, seen by the news agency Reuters in May, identifies "Islamic extremism" as a growing worldwide threat that has gained in strength and proliferated in terms of the number of groups over the last several years. The document discusses robust plans to "intensify operations against global jihadist groups" while trying "to avoid costly, large-scale US military interventions to achieve counterterrorism objectives." According to the document, the US will demand more from its allies in financial and military contributions, evidently to fill any gaps between American commitments on requirements on the ground. While avoiding new large-scale deployments of troops, the United States will nevertheless boost troop presence in particular hot spots, including Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Afghanistan. In addition, the draft strategy promotes international cooperation to target jihadist "ideologues, technical experts, financiers, external operators and battlefield commanders," and to deny both physical and

online safe spaces from which to operate. The United States will take unilateral action whenever and wherever necessary to forestall imminent threats to the United States. The Pentagon will be granted greater authority over military operations and troop deployments in the field, and Obama Administration restrictions on counterterrorism operations outside current declared war zones intended to reduce civilian casualties will be loosened.

Trump elaborated on these themes in his speech to the Arab-Islamic-American Summit in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia in May. Asserting that “history’s great test” is “to conquer extremism and vanquish the forces of terrorism,” he described the conflict as nothing less than a “battle between Good and Evil” that requires far greater burden sharing from the countries of the Middle East to drive “terrorists and extremists” from the region and ultimately “DRIVE THEM OUT OF THIS EARTH.” [Capitalization in White House original.]

Tactically, Trump emphasized, as did his draft strategy, the importance of denying terrorists control over “territory and populations” as well as “access to funds,” particularly in the case of the so-called Islamic State (IS). He announced an agreement to establish a Terrorist Financing Targeting Center, co-chaired by the United States and Saudi Arabia, and including all members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, to help accomplish this. Finally, he singled out Iran, saying it must be isolated and deprived of its ability to support terrorism in the region and beyond if the strategy is to succeed.

As he did in the Afghanistan speech and draft CT strategy document, Trump proclaimed that the United States will not promote political change (democratization, human rights, liberalization, and so on) as part of the anti-terrorist mission. Rather, he touted a new “Principled Realism” which will focus on narrow security and military goals. The United States, he said in Riyadh, is “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,” and will “advance security through stability, not through radical disruption...” The president went on to promise that “wherever possible, we will seek gradual reforms—not sudden intervention” and “partnershipbased on shared interests and values”; values which, despite their evident importance to the president’s remarks, remained entirely unspecified.

Much of the strategy the administration has outlined so far differs little from the approach of the Obama Administration. President Obama—while wary of maintaining major troop deployments in hotspots such as Iraq (from which he withdrew US combatants in 2011), and Syria (where he ignored his own “red line” on the use of chemical weapons against civilians by the government in 2013)—did, like Trump, authorize troop increases in Afghanistan against his original instincts. He dramatically stepped up the drone war on terrorist targets in the broader Middle East, which has proved to be his major counterterrorism legacy. Like Trump, Obama too was initially leery of

“nation-building” efforts, emphasized the importance of contributions from allies in winning the fight, and sought to deny terrorists access to funding and territory.

But if Trump’s strategy resembles Obama’s in many particulars, there are still important differences in details, definitions, rhetoric, and overall conception that, together, raise many key questions and suggest potential weaknesses of the administration’s new approach.

### **Hard Questions Remain**

*Where’s the how-to manual?* As with the president’s new Afghan strategy, the administration has so far failed to sketch in detail how the overall CT strategy intends to accomplish its objectives. What methods, tactics, and outcomes does the administration endorse? What guidance is being provided to military commanders in the field? Given the administration’s reputation for skimpy policy planning and its intention to devolve significant tactical authority to these commanders, this seems less like a well-considered tactic to keep the enemy guessing and more like a potential liability that could lead to disastrous consequences on the ground.

*What constitutes “victory?”* The administration has yet to supply a credible definition of victory to guide US combatant forces and American interactions with allies. Indeed, the very concept of victory in the war on terror is controversial. Trump himself embraced it at Fort Myer by insisting on a “clear definition of

victory” in Afghanistan. But his draft CT strategy states that terrorism “cannot be defeated with any sort of finality,” just as Obama warned in a speech at MacDill Air Force Base in December 2016 that “we will not achieve the kind of clearly defined victory comparable to those that we won in previous wars against nations.” This gap between rhetoric and reality—confusion about the end state—could drive tactical approaches in very different directions, creating real problems on the ground and in cyberspace, and potentially driving political disenchantment with the strategy itself, undermining it at home and abroad.

*Is the strategy’s presentation helpful to its goals?* A related problem is Trump’s tendency to overhype the problem. As he noted in Riyadh, this fight is nothing less than “history’s great test—to conquer extremism and vanquish the forces of terrorism.” Failure means “terrorism’s devastation of life will continue to spread. Peaceful societies will become engulfed by violence. And the futures of many generations will be sadly squandered.” This and civilizational hyperbole of the sort that Trump used in his Warsaw address in July to help define the threat—“The fundamental question of our time is whether the West has the will to survive”—reinforce the concept of the fight against terrorism as an apocalyptic struggle.

The president’s use of religious terminology to describe the phenomenon, most prominently displayed in his Riyadh speech, further complicates the issue. For Trump, the fight against IS and other terrorist groups is a

Manichean conflict that is nothing short of a battle between “Good and Evil,” as he said in Riyadh. And as for the terrorists themselves, he noted, “YOUR SOUL WILL BE CONDEMNED.” [Capitalization in White House original.]

But terrorism, per se, is not an existential threat, one capable of bringing to an end the “continued existence of a nation, its government or its people.” Individual terrorist groups such as IS may aspire to pose such a threat to the United States, as the Soviet Union and, arguably, Nazi Germany did, but it does not now and is unlikely to in the future. Likewise, terrorism itself is a tactic, not an ideology, a political cause, or a religious movement. The use of terror by certain groups, while a dangerous threat, cannot of itself bring down the West or its allies. To suggest that it can may serve to provide political and moral cover for extensive abuses on the part of the United States and its allies as well as excessive use of force and unwise interventions. As President Obama noted in his remarks at MacDill, terrorists “don't pose an existential threat to our nation, and we must not make the mistake of elevating them as if they do. That does their job for them. It makes them more important and helps them with recruitment.”

President Trump's dramatization of the threat and his concomitant prioritization of fighting terrorism by any means necessary also comes at the expense of human rights concerns and is likely to embolden autocrats in the Arab world and elsewhere to intensify crackdowns on

dissidents, activists, journalists, and citizens with opinions, whom they often arrest and penalize under broad and vaguely worded “anti-terrorism” laws. All of this risks generating further instability and terrorism.

*Does the CT policy advance US regional goals?* The strategy and its accompanying rhetoric is also complicating regional politics in ways that are proving extremely unhelpful for overall US regional policy. Trump's choice of Riyadh to deliver his call to arms against terrorism, complete with a denunciation of Iran and Hezbollah and praise for his Saudi hosts, has been widely seen as placing the United States squarely in the middle of the Sunni-Shi'a conflict. Among other things, this is likely to pose difficulties for the United States in Iraq, where Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi needs US support in his bid to achieve national reconciliation, and in Yemen, where Saudi Arabia looks for US backing to prosecute its disastrous war against the Iranian-supported Houthi rebels.

In addition, Riyadh undoubtedly took Trump's endorsement as a green light to launch its campaign against Qatar, an ally the president called “a crucial strategic partner” hosting America's largest military base in the Middle East, Al-Udeid, in his Riyadh remarks on May 21. But in a series of tweets on June 6 Trump denounced Doha, asserting that other members of the GCC were all “pointing to Qatar” as a financier of terror and that GCC action against Doha may be “the beginning of the end to the horror of terrorism!” The policy confusion this

has caused can only serve to undermine a common approach by the US and its allies to stamp out terrorism, prevent its recurrence, and achieve other diplomatic goals in the region.

*Does the strategy fully address all aspects of the problem?* While placing heavy emphasis on military solutions and shifting responsibility for the political and economic aftermath to others, the Trump Administration is dealing with only a part, and a small part at that, of what is required to mount a broadly successful CT strategy in conflict zones such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. Far from “trying to rebuild countries in our own image instead of pursuing our security interests above all other considerations,” the “nation-building” efforts that the president derides are in fact essential to safeguarding those security interests, as they are key to addressing the root causes of terrorism and inhibiting the conditions for its survival and growth.

Nation-building at heart consists of stabilizing a conflict zone and then “creating self-sustaining political and economic institutions that will ultimately permit competent democratic governance and economic growth.” This phase, which Trump has vowed to abandon in favor of simply “killing terrorists,” is in fact vital to the long-term success of any comprehensive counterterrorism strategy. In particular, democratic governance, the promotion of which Trump firmly rejects, is closely correlated with reductions in the conditions for terrorist violence. And state-sponsored violence against citizens, ethnic discrimination, corruption, low

levels of government accountability, restrictions on freedom of expression and so on all are strongly associated with increases in violent extremism. Thus, failure to incorporate carefully considered “nation-building” efforts into the overall CT strategy is a recipe for ineffectiveness and failure.

*Is the strategy properly resourced throughout the interagency?* The president’s vow to implement his counterterrorism strategy through “the integration of all instruments of American power—diplomatic, economic, and military—toward a successful outcome” (Fort Myer) is a sensible approach that both the Bush and Obama administrations likewise adopted. However, as our past two presidents found, this is easier said than done, and the Trump administration’s determination to cut funding for foreign affairs agencies and overseas assistance programs, and to leave the State Department woefully understaffed, demonstrates how ill-equipped the administration is to accomplish it.

This, in turn, will place heavier burdens on the military even as its mission is made more difficult. As General James Mattis (now Secretary of Defense) told Senator Roger Wicker of the Senate Armed Services Committee in 2013, “If you don’t fund the State Department fully, then I need to buy more ammunition...The more that we put into the State Department’s diplomacy, hopefully the less we have to put into a military budget.” Or, as Senator Lindsay Graham has noted, “Any



budget we pass that guts the State Department's budget, you will never win this war.”

### Toward a More Effective CT Strategy

The administration's evolving CT strategy is based on some sound fundamentals that previous administrations adopted. For example, the focus on gaining improved cooperation and contributions from allies is a sound course, as is demanding that Afghans (and Iraqis and others) own their own future and take the lead in building strong institutions to shrink the space for extremism. A “conditions-based” approach to drawing down US troop commitments in Afghanistan and other countries where US forces are engaged in CT operations is the right one. But several yawning gaps must be addressed if the Trump strategy is to come close to delivering the “victory” the president hopes for.

- *Nation-building*, including an emphasis on good governance, must be in the mix. The development of the administration's strategy cannot ignore this crucial phase, which is more complicated and perhaps more essential than kinetic operations. It is possible to disagree on the right mix of programs (best determined in close consultation with host nations) and level of funding. It is not possible to abandon it altogether and still eliminate the instability that gives rise to terrorism in the first place.
- *Department of State operations and foreign affairs funding* related to stability operations

and governance, including anti-corruption and institution building efforts, must be restored through budget negotiations. While funding and personnel levels should be up for discussion, these vital elements of the overall counterterrorism strategy must be determined in the context of the desired end-state and as part of an integrated deliberation involving the White House, Departments of State and Defense, and concerned congressional committees.

- *Support for human rights cannot be neglected.* This means not only a strong human rights message as part of US public diplomacy, but making clear to non-democratic allies in the war on terror that the United States expects that the utmost care will be taken in their military operations against terrorists to protect civilian populations. In addition, the United States must hold these governments to account for abusing the human rights of their own citizens, and insist that the fight against terrorism cannot be used as a cover for intensified repression of political activists and opponents.
- *Public messaging should be more realistic*, and less infused with apocalyptic and religious rhetoric. Terrorist threats need to be put into perspective to reassure the public and set realistic expectations. The United States must avoid magnifying terrorist groups in importance and feeding into their narrative that the war on terror really is a religious war pitting the West against Islam.
- *The national command authority* must have full visibility on operations and troop

commitments in the field, and ensure that decisions are made by commanders acting under detailed policy guidance and in accordance with a clear overall counterterrorism and foreign policy strategy. Devolving too much authority from Washington to the field commanders without such guidance and oversight can lead to policy disconnects, tactical confusion, ineffective operations, and greater military and civil casualties.

As even the Trump administration has acknowledged, no quick victory can be expected in the war on extremism and terror, and graduated success will come at a price and over a very long period of time. Major adjustments will be needed if the latest edition of America's CT strategy is to be effective in the long run.