



## PERSPECTIVES

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# Trump's National Security Strategy: US and Israeli Viewpoints Converge

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Though the recently released US [National Security Strategy](#) (NSS) is not intended to present a concrete and detailed set of American policies for the Middle East, it does reflect the general logic and goals of the Trump administration for the region – and indicates a convergence of US and Israeli views on the Middle East. Its substance and implications warrant close attention in Jerusalem.

The chapter in the new US National Security Strategy (NSS) document on the Middle East is short but powerful. It marks a significant departure from the Obama legacy and is thus of great interest to both America's partners and its adversaries in the region.

The strategy recognizes that instability and an unfavorable balance of regional power in the Middle East adversely affect US interests. According to the NSS, the region's instability derives from the interaction between Iranian expansion, violent jihadist terror and ideology, weak states, socioeconomic stagnation, and regional rivalries.

The document cautions that disengagement from the Middle East will not shield the US from a spillover of the region's problems. Nor does it maintain that there is a quick or easy fix. Rather, the NSS promotes long-term and patient US involvement in the region as a means of promoting a favorable balance of power, fostering stability, and furthering US security and economic interests.

In a distinct change from the perspective of the Obama administration, the NSS does not view the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a major cause of the region's problems. Nonetheless, the strategy reaffirms the Trump administration's commitment to facilitating a comprehensive peace agreement, which it believes

can serve the wider interest of promoting a favorable regional balance of power by increasing Israeli-Arab cooperation in confronting common threats.

The priority actions outlined in the NSS in the regional context center around retaining an American military presence, shoring up partnerships to strengthen security and stability, sustaining Iraq's independence, seeking a settlement of the Syrian civil war, denying Iran its nuclear and regional aspirations, and promoting an Israeli-Palestinian comprehensive peace agreement.

The NSS underlines Washington's commitment to help the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) monarchies strengthen their political and military institutions, which includes providing them with military capabilities and building an effective joint missile defense system. The US will also encourage the Arab states to modernize their economies and advance social reforms. Having learned from past mistakes, the US will attempt to achieve these goals in a gradual fashion without imposing American values on the countries in question.

### **Implications for Israel**

The NSS makes clear that the US is not disengaging from the Middle East. This is reassuring news for Israel. It was not so long ago that America's partners in the region were grappling with the possible implications of the Obama administration's desire to pivot away from the region towards Asia.

Moreover, the general policy principles outlined in the NSS represent a convergence of American and Israeli views on the region. The Iranian issue shows this clearly. Trump's NSS breaks from the previous administration's perception of Iran as part of the solution to regional instability, instead squarely defining Tehran as a major contributor to the region's problems. American leadership is working to contain and roll back Iran's malign influence and nuclear ambitions. This is a primary Israeli interest.

In this context, continued US military involvement in Iraq and Syria will serve to ensure direct US – and indirect Israeli - influence on the role of Iran and its proxies in those arenas.

The convergence of views regarding Iran increases the potential for US-Israel dialogue and the coordination of efforts to counter malign Iranian activities in the Middle East. A recent [report](#) indicates that secret talks on the Iranian issue have already started and that a number of working groups have been established.

The NSS also marks a clear change in the way the US administration understands Israel's place in the region. Gone are the assumptions held by previous administrations that support for Israel comes with high costs from the Arab world and that resolving the Palestinian conflict is key to improving US standing in the region. This opens the way for Israel to play a more substantial role in advancing US interests in the Middle East.

The prominence of an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement in the administration's overall approach to the region has been scaled back. The US sees an agreement as potentially conducive to stronger Israel-Gulf ties, which would advance US goals in the region. Israeli-Palestinian peace is no longer afforded the status of a vital condition for improving Israeli-Gulf cooperation. As the NSS states, "Israel is not the cause of the region's problems. States have increasingly found common interests with Israel in confronting common threats." The administration's approach to the peace process seems to be based less on normative precepts and more on policy calculations.

Even so, Israel should not lose sight of the fact that the Trump administration remains committed to advancing the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Jerusalem would be well advised not to reject American efforts to renew negotiations.

The Gulf countries command a central role in the administration's approach to the region. They are expected to fulfill three interrelated roles: to help contain Iran and its proxies; to work towards the rejection of radical Islamic ideologies; and to contribute to the US economy.

The US is thus more than likely to continue selling the Gulf states advanced weaponry, including possibly [releasing](#) the F-35 to them – a move that would undermine Israel's traditional qualitative military edge. Consequently, the political and military aspects of the US-Gulf-Israel triangle will need to remain a high priority issue for discussion between Jerusalem and Washington.

Given the primacy of maintaining stability in the Middle East over advancing reforms, the Trump administration seems set to preserve military and economic cooperation with Israel's neighbors and peace partners Egypt and Jordan. The continued stability of these countries is a vital interest for Israel and an area for US-Israel cooperation.

Trump's perception of Russia and China as global power rivals needs to be appreciated by Israel at the regional level. While this perception is not far off from Israel's own assessment of Russian and Chinese involvement in the region, Jerusalem must ensure that its dealings with these powers are transparent to, and coordinated with, the US administration.

From Israel's perspective, a major gap in the NSS is the lack of any reference to Hezbollah. Though equated with the struggle against Iranian influence, Hezbollah has developed into a significant regional player in its own right. The US needs a clear policy towards Lebanon that explicitly addresses Hezbollah's domestic power and foreign interference.

All in all, Jerusalem can draw reassurance from the essentials of the NSS. The strategy is substantially consistent with the Israeli viewpoint on regional matters, lays the foundations for a more robust policy towards Iran, encourages Israeli-Gulf cooperation, and prioritizes stability. Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, if

commenced under US auspices, are more likely to be oriented towards solving the issues in a manner that supports Trump's regional outlook than as a values-laden process trapped in the confines of competing historical and moral claims.

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