

Why the US should have a new grand strategy for the Middle East

by Ramil Kazimov

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The United States should develop a grand strategy for the Middle East. Such a strategy should be anchored in a visionary approach toward the region.

The fundamentals of a new grand strategy

Traditionally, the U.S. approach to the Middle East has been to keep the oil flowing and to protect Israel. This is a faulty policy and the fundamentals of a new strategy should avoid it.

A new grand strategy should not be sporadic - but rather constant and proactive. It should not be on standby mode and react to on-going processes when administrations change in the White House. Rather administrations should be able to continue the already designed grand strategy. For example, the latest so called "Peace to Prosperity" of the Trump Administration on Palestine and Israel claims to have realistic solution to the problem.¹ It seems far from reality as it does not incorporate the big regional picture - does the conflict between the two parties only affect them? What are the interests of other countries at stake? Can they be part of the solution? If not, how then can any potential negative impacts be offset or eliminated? Hence, it only reacts to the conflict and offers limited vision as opposed to ensuring inclusivity.

Similarly, the U.S. approach should not be egoistical, only ensuring the flow of oil and guarding Israel. It should rather look ahead in terms of a U.S. role following the post-oil era in the Middle East. For example, what could be the risks after the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries deplete their hydrocarbon resources? Would they be vulnerable and more likely to seek partners that are America's adversaries? Why and what could the U.S. give to these states after the depletion of oil? For instance, the U.S. wants Iran and other states in the region to refrain from developing nuclear weapons. What if the GCC countries pursue nuclear capabilities after U.S. dollars stop flowing to them? It is in neither the U.S. nor Israel's long-term national interests to protect Israel in a complicated region. It is definitely not in the U.S. interest when its ally Israel is surrounded with vulnerable and unpredictable states. The U.S. needs to design a clear roadmap on how to empower other regional states in this complicated yet opportunistic region.

The strategy should correctly address cultural dynamics and identities. The Middle East is not homogenous - it is a heterogenous region. The people speak different languages - dozens of Arabic dialects, Turkish, Persian and so on. This in itself is a harbinger of different identities in the region. An important part of US grand strategy in the Middle East should be working with local actors to better understand the impact of culture on their politics.

¹The White House. "Peace to Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People", January 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/peacetoprosperty/>.

A need for vision

Going forward, the U.S. approach to the Middle East needs to be more visionary. At the same time, the strategy should clearly describe what it expects from the Middle East. This is a crucial message both for local populations and outside powers. The new grand strategy's core focus should be a post-oil security posture across the Middle East. Empowerment of vulnerable states along with a cultural 'boots on the ground' approach are key elements of this policy.

The U.S. and the Middle East are in need of in-depth cultural understanding. The answer is a heavy investment in education, with a focus on children across the Middle East. Although an investment in education requires a long-term commitment, it is a powerful tool to maximize U.S. security over the long haul.

More generally, the U.S. should empower vulnerable states so that they become predictable regional powers. What this does not mean is military intervention like the 2003 Iraq War, which has triggered more problems than solutions when it comes to terrorism and extremism.

Rather, a truly “grand” strategy needs to prepare for a future where Middle Eastern politics revolves less around Israel and oil and more around development and governance.

The Middle East has survived many tests and still has a lot to offer the U.S. even after the depletion of natural resources. The U.S. just needs to address the untapped potential across the region that could be beneficial for the interests of Americans.