



An Insight into the Democrats' Counterterrorism Policy

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Edited by: Menna Khaled

Today's landscape is different from what the world has endured and encountered in 2001. Today countries are facing a complex mix of domestic and international terrorist forces that impact the security of the nation states. For decades, the United States of America's strategy has remained unchanged by focusing on countering terrorism as a primary national security priority while neglecting today's increasing issues like extremism, social injustice, and racism.

U.S. administrations for decades have worked toward implementing counter terrorism strategies and policies to combat terrorism, particularly in the Middle East, as a main national security priority, as U.S. administrations have held the Middle East to be responsible for the proliferation of terrorism since September 11. However, Biden's administration takes a different course. Biden stressed in his recently released Interim National Security Guidance on his desire to focus on Europe and the Indo-Pacific rather than the Middle East.

In light of the new national security strategy by the U.S. and the administration's recent implemented policies in regards to countering terrorism, the Forum for Development and Human Rights Dialogue issues a report to focus on the new administration strategy and approach toward terrorism. The report demonstrates that U.S. national security strategy, unlike in the past, no longer refers to terrorism as the primary level of U.S. national security threat; rather, first China and Russia, then countries like Iran and North Korea, then terrorism and extremism.

The report first sheds the light on Biden's rhetoric on terrorism as a non-existential threat to the United States of America. The report then finds it necessary to first analyze the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance in order to understand Biden's measures to counter terrorism, as it reveals U.S. agenda national security priorities, where terrorism no longer remains a primary threat.

The report observes that the U.S. national security threats in the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance is divided as follows; threats without borders, challenges to democracies by anti-democratic forces on a national and international level, change in the distribution of power, shortcomings in the current international liberal order, and finally artificial intelligence. Finally, the report sheds the light on how Biden's administration deprioritized the Middle East and how it sought to gradually limit its own powers in its fight against terrorism, through many forms; withdrawing U.S.

forces from Afghanistan and Iraq, limiting the use of military force, ending war in Yemen, and repealing the 2001 Authorization for use of Military Force (AUFM).

Terrorism as a Non-existential Threat

“We have no time to waste. The simple truth is, America cannot afford to be absent any longer on the world stage. And under the Biden-Harris Administration, America is back. Diplomacy is back. Alliances are back. But we are not looking back”. These statements were from the opening lines of Joe Biden’s Interim National Security Strategic Guidance.

Before his inauguration as a president, Biden future counterterrorism strategy was noted in his discourse and campaigns. During his role as a vice president in the administration of Barack Obama, Biden said in one of his talks that terrorism is not considered as an existential threat to the U.S in comparison to the real threat posed by authoritarian nuclear powers. In 2016, Biden said “Terrorism is not an existential threat ----- What remains is the prospect that the real existential threat is loose nukes, an unintended conflict that erupts with another nuclear power—Russia, China, that not-stable figure in North Korea [Kim Jong Un], Pakistan”.

Biden campaign in 2020 published a plan for partnership with the Arab American community. On one hand the document focused on settling the relationship with Arab Americans in terms of limiting race and discrimination issues, on the other hand, the plan included vital implications for Biden’s future counter terrorism strategy. The plan foreshadowed the focus of Biden’s strategy on countering violent extremism instead of countering terrorism. The plan stated “Biden will order his Justice Department to focus additional resources to combat hate crimes — including religion-based hate crimes — and to confront white nationalist terrorism”.

In September 2020, Biden has also announced his strategy in regards to countering terrorism in the Middle East by limiting military forces; “These ‘forever wars’ have to end. I support drawing down the troops. But here’s the problem, we still have to worry about terrorism and [the Islamic State]”.

Along these lines, Biden’s discourse and plans were further reflected in his Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, where he pointed out that challenges posed by the health crisis, climate change, and defects in the international system have taken over terrorism as the existential threats to the

United States of America. Counterterrorism took a back seat in the new administration national security strategy.

Interim National Security Strategic Guidance

On the 3rd of March 2021, the U.S. administration released the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance. The new strategy conveys the newly elected president, Joe Biden's roadmap to U.S future, and how U.S will engage and act in the world.

Biden's national security strategy is divided into five main categories. The first category of threats that the U.S. government is facing is the threats that belong to no borders. According to Biden, "Recent events show all too clearly that many of the biggest threats we face respect no borders or walls, and must be met with collective action". These threats include threats that escalate from pandemics, biological risks, climate crisis, cyber and digital threats, and international economic disruptions. The strategy also revealed the profound existential threat posed by violent extremism and terrorism, and the proliferation of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction. The strategy has further explained that the United States will not engage again in wars against terror, and that the U.S will end its longest war against terrorism in Afghanistan.

The second category that has been tackled by the strategy is the pressure and threats posed to democracy on both a national and international level. The document puts emphasis on the challenges that democracies are facing from anti-democratic forces and authoritarian powers, namely China and Russia. Exploiting weaknesses in democratic nations and spreading misinformation by anti-democratic forces have created alternative models of authoritarian governance and eroded existing international democratic norms, whereby alternating and reversing these trends is essential for U.S national security. It stated "democracies across the globe, including our own, are increasingly under siege. Free societies have been challenged from within by corruption, inequality, polarization, populism, and illiberal threats to the rule of law".

The third threat addressed in the National Security document is the present change in the distribution of power in the international system by authoritarian governments, China and Russia.

“We must also contend with the reality that the distribution of power across the world is changing, creating new threats”. The document emphasizes on the assertive role played by China in the international system through its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power. The strategy also outlines the disruptive role played by Russia on the world stage.

According to Biden, “Both Beijing and Moscow have invested heavily in efforts meant to check U.S. strengths and prevent us from defending our interests and allies around the world”. After China and Russia, Iran and North Korea as regional actors have been considered in the second place of threats to the U.S. The document shed the light on Iran and North Korea’ threatening actions to U.S., its allies, partners and their efforts to acquire ‘game-changing capabilities’. These actors are challenging regional stability.

Additionally, Biden noted other challenges from fragile governments as well as terrorism and violent extremism as the next threats mentioned in the document.

The fourth category of threats is related to the present flaws and defects in the international order. The document states, “The liberal international order, which relies on a series of US-backed alliances, institutions, agreements, and norms, has been tested and its shortcomings identified”. Accordingly, Biden outlined the necessity of working with allies and partners to address those shortcomings and challenges in order to reform the existing international order, which no longer serves the interests of the United States or abide by the norms of democracies.

Technological revolution is the fifth category of U.S. national security threats. Biden referred to the innovation and the development of artificial intelligence and quantum computing by leading powers, namely China and Russia, which could negatively impact the economic and military balance among states. Hence, he stressed on the fundamentality of America to invest and retain its position as a scientific and technological edge once more.

After tackling and demonstrating Joe Biden’s strategic plan to refocus U.S. priorities on confronting great power, China and Russia, and to address U.S national security priorities and threats, it has been indisputable that terrorism is no longer constituted as an existential threat to the United States of America. Counter terrorism has been alternated by the threats posed by China and Russia as well as the no borders threats looming in climate crisis, pandemic, and cyber threats as the main challenges contemporarily facing the United States.

Reforming U.S. Counterterrorism Policy

Counterterrorism has been the central element in America's national security agenda since September 11. However, counterterrorism has been sidelined from U.S. top national security priorities and from the government national defense strategy. The administration seeks to reduce U.S. military forces involvement in operations against terrorism, and rather focus on great power competition with China and Russia as it has been outlined in Biden's Strategic Guidance. The National Defense Strategy has even articulated that the central challenge to U.S. security is "the reemergence of long-term, strategic competition" and that "Inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security".

During the interval of September 11, 2001 attacks by Al-Qaeda, the U.S. has created a counterterrorism strategy to use all resources, enforce law and military response to the threat posed by terrorism. Currently terrorism still remains among the United States top national security but it is not the primary one. After two decades of aggressive counter terrorism strategy, Biden's administration shifts to a one more focused on multilateral cooperation and warnings.

Biden's rhetoric and actions in regards to limiting U.S. forces abroad by withdrawing troops from Afghanistan and Iraq, limiting the use of military force, ending war in Yemen, and the administration ambition to repeal the 2001 Authorization for use of Military Force 2001 Authorization for use of Military Force AUFM, marks how the U.S. under the democrats administration has a more diplomatic and rather non aggressive approach on terrorism. These actions also reflect on Biden's agenda and discourse on how the fight against terrorism is no longer a primary national security threat.

In regards to limiting U.S. forces abroad, two months after his inauguration, Biden took necessary steps to end what he called "forever wars", nearly ending U.S military presence in Afghanistan and Iraq. In January, the pentagon reduced the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan and Iraq to 2,500. The reduction of the troops to this number in both countries is considered to be the lowest level since the war on terror in 2001.

The war in Afghanistan has spanned across the administrations of George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump. Only after few months of his inauguration, President Biden has announced the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan. In Biden speech on the U.S Way Forward in Afghanistan, Biden underscored on the counterproductive role played by U.S troops against terrorism, only costing trillions of dollars and thousands of lives. Biden concluded that the military presence in Afghanistan has to come to an end by creating the ideal conditions for withdrawal; “I have concluded that it’s time to end America’s longest war. It’s time for American troops to come home”, Biden said.

Biden administration has inherited a previous negotiated deal between the U.S. government and Taliban to withdraw the U.S. forces by May, 2021, which Biden has highlighted to be very hard to achieve within three months of his inauguration; rather he revealed the government plans to past a May 1 deadline. Recently, in April, Biden announced the U.S. combat troops will be withdrawn by September 11, 2021, which will coincide with the 20th anniversary of the Sept.11, 2001 terror attacks.

Biden administration has reviewed the previous government policy of counterterrorism with the intention of reducing the role of counterterrorism in U.S. foreign policy, limiting the use of military force and cooperating instead of unilateral action that prevailed during the Trump era. The Middle East has been deprioritized by Biden’s administration, whereby U.S. is setting up its national interests by strengthening its connections and ties to Indo-Pacific, Europe, and the Western Hemisphere, and then the Middle East.

In regards to countering terrorism abroad, particularly in the Middle East, Biden made it clear in the Strategic Guidance that the use of military force is not the key to the region’s challenges. The strategy outlined that the U.S government will not allocate money to Middle East states fighting terrorism as it will be later used against U.S. interests.

In Yemen, Biden has announced the withdrawal of U.S. support to military operations. Since the outbreak of the Yemen civil war in 2014, the U.S. government has backed the Yemeni government and its Saudi led allies in the war against the Houthis; however, President Joe Biden said in his first foreign policy speech “The war in Yemen must end”. Correspondingly, the U.S. announced its opposition to the conducted offensive operations in Yemen. In addition, the U.S. State Department has confirmed Biden’s step to remove the Iran backed Houthi rebels in Yemen from the Foreign Terrorist Organization and Specially Designated Global Terrorist lists.

The government has also announced its will to work with the congress to repeal the 2001 Authorization for use of Military Force (AUFM) and replace it with a 'narrow and specific framework' that can protect Americans from terrorist threats. The 2001 Authorization for use of Military Force was issued to confront the 9/11 attacks and to underpin U.S. war efforts in countering terrorism in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Thus, repealing the AUFM will restrict the authorization of U.S. forces operations in conflicts on a global level.

Conclusion

It is worth noting how the United States of America counter terrorism policy has shifted under the presidency of Joe Biden from previous administrations. Biden has changed the U.S. counterterrorism strategy and approach that has remained constant for decades, which focused on fighting terrorism as a primary national security priority while neglecting today's increasing issues like extremism, social injustice, and racism

Biden's latest decisions and policies as reflected in the Interim Guidance and his rhetoric decreases U.S. military activities in the fight against terrorism. U.S. policies under the democrats' administration have gained a more refined approach. The administration has replaced terrorism threat by threat posed authoritarian leading powers, climate crisis, and technological revolution. After demonstrating the current administration reformation on U.S. priorities, it has been indisputable that terrorism is no longer constituted as an existential threat to the United States of America. The current government has changed the focus of its national security strategy, with its primary focus to restore American leadership, and hegemony in the in the international system that has been tested by the Chinese and the Russian government increase of influence.