

Policy of the new U.S. administration in the Middle East and the threats posed by Islamic extremism – a forecast

Donald Trump's surprising victory in the U.S. presidential elections has put a question mark over the future of the superpower's foreign and security policy. This applies to essentially every direction and aspect of U.S. actions on the international stage, including such crucial and pressing issues such as the situation in the broader Middle East and the fight against the threat posed by Islamic extremism and terrorism. During the election campaign, which was extremely sharp and brutal even by American standards, Donald Trump, already as an official Republican candidate, kept referring to these issues. From his statements and announcements, delivered in the course of the campaign, even taking into account the context of the election struggle, a picture has emerged of a probable radical change in U.S. policy, particularly with regard to the regional problems in the Middle East and Islamic radicalism. Although historical experiences, especially those relating to stable and strong democratic states such as the U.S., indicate that the radical statements, delivered during the election campaign, do not translate entirely into subsequent policies implemented after gaining power, it is certain that the new U.S. president would not continue the majority of the actions and policies of his predecessors. A lot, of course, depends on the members of the administration president will choose. However, it should be remembered that the final shape of the president's actions, in

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addition to the program of his party and its ideological-philosophical 'base', other criteria matter, such as his experience and political life, beliefs, and even personal character and temperament.

Americans in the Middle East – a return to the Republican credo?

Following Trump's announcements during the election campaign, we may only attempt to predict what actions with regard to the Middle East and the threat of terrorism might be made by the new president. Such an attempt should obviously be accompanied by a considerable margin of error, as it is based on incomplete, limited and uncertain data. However, it is highly likely that Donald Trump as a Republican candidate would largely stick to the main points of the Republican Party's program in his strategic plans on key foreign policy issues. This scenario is all the more likely given that the president-elect will be somewhat forced to use human resources of Republicans and their intellectual and academic base in creating various centers of state power, including diplomatic structures. Such a 'Republican turn' in foreign and security policy in Washington is above all, to put it simply, a return to hard geopolitical realism, a retreat from the Democrats' idealistic tradition approach to international relations as practiced by the current administration of Barack Obama. In this context, it is quite certain that in the region of the greater Middle East Donald Trump's future team would not support 'democratic' movements or forces, not to mention show any support for 'pro-democratic' changes along the lines of the Arab Spring, which had so many dire consequences. There will also be no engagements in projects and ventures perceived by the American right as contrary to the U.S. 'hard' strategic interests in the region, such as a 'reset' with Iran and promoting the emergence of a Palestinian state at the expense of Israel.

The Trump administration would, therefore, likely be pro-Israeli and definitely anti-Iranian (perhaps even anti-Shiite). This means a significant reverse of the vectors of American foreign policy towards a number of regional problems. The most spectacular changes may concern the U.S. attitude to the already concluded nuclear agreement with Iran (and more broadly Iran's role and influence in regional events), the war in Syria, and the Palestinian issue.

The end of the 'reset' with Iran?

The arrangement concerning the Iranian nuclear program concluded with Iran by major powers (the so-called P5 + 1 group) in the previous year may now be contested and delayed by the new U.S. administration, even if it is not immediately abandoned. Likewise, the substantial influence and importance of Iran in the region (noticeable for several years due to the events in Syria, Iraq and Yemen and the fight against the Islamic State) will probably be the object of the new strategy of the White House calculated to reverse this trend unfavorable for the U.S. and its regional allies. All this would probably mean a further escalation of tension in relations between Washington and Tehran, which has its own implications mainly in the Middle East. The change of U.S. policy towards Iran and its regional allies to more a conservative and assertive one also means the risk of worsening U.S. relations with Iraq, Lebanon or the Palestinian Authority, where the influence and political role of Iran have been unquestionably significant.

On the other hand, such a change is also an opportunity for U.S. to return to the once close strategic and functional relations with Israel, Saudi Arabia and its Arab allies in the Gulf region, which have undergone far-reaching erosion during the eight-year rule of the Democrats.

Return to the close alliance with Israel?

In the case of Israel, it is not only the renewal and warming of traditionally strong relations with Washington that is at stake, which translate to strategic closeness and cooperation in military projects, but also U.S. support for key aspects of Israel's geopolitics. This support and understanding have gone through their ups and downs over the past eight years, and Israel has found out more than once the hard way when it comes to unfavorable decisions of the U.S. government. Now, with the possible return to the classic rules of Republican politics, Israel would be looking at the relations with Washington with greater optimism. In particular, this concerns the Palestinian issue, where the Obama administration had exerted overwhelming pressure on Israel regarding rapid adoption of solutions (highly unfavorable from the perspective of the Jewish state and its geopolitical interests), developed, among others, with the participation of American diplomacy. These solutions were treated extremely emotionally by the outgoing U.S. president. If the future government would actually be guided mainly by traditional optics of the Republican policies, the perception of

the Palestinian issue adopted by the previous administration would undoubtedly be rejected (the current administration was much closer in this topic to the views presented by the liberal elites of Western European countries than the traditional American geopolitical thought).

The renaissance of the role of the House of Saud in the American policy towards the Middle East?

With regard to Saudi Arabia, the new U.S. administration may also seek to rebuild a close relationship with Riyadh, based on mutual interests in the region, mainly restraining Shiite Iran and its regional allies. A strengthening of the alliance between America and the Kingdom of Saud will probably occur, perhaps even as strong as it was in the 1990s when Saudi Arabia was the most important (along with Israel) regional partner and ally of the United States in the Middle East. The United States, driven by the imperative of limiting the influence and the role of Iran in the region, may seek to further strengthen political, economic and military cooperation with Riyadh and its partners in the Gulf region. From a Saudi perspective, such a turn of events would be the most desirable. Saudi Arabia has been acting on the regional arena alone for several years now and without strong U.S. support. It has found itself trapped in too many goals with limited resources and capabilities. As a result, Saudis got stuck in a lasting conflict in Yemen, lost the position of a decision maker (on the side of the rebellion) in the Syrian war, and even worsened their relationships with many existing allies (Egypt, Oman, Lebanon). The rapprochement with the United States would be a chance for them and hope to break the strategic stalemate. From the U.S. perspective, the warming of relations with Saudi Arabia could happen thanks to limiting U.S. involvement in Iraq and, the increase in involvement in the Yemeni conflict, which, in turn, would create the risk of further worsening of relations with Iran.

Syria – time for isolation of the conflict?

The analysis of not very precise and sometimes even mutually contradictory statements by Donald Trump (as a candidate) and his partners on the issue of Syria does not allow a clear and unequivocal answer to the question about possible future policy of the new president in this regard. Perhaps the ideas of the advisers gathered around the vice president-elect,

Mike Pence, will prevail. They advocate the creation of a kind of 'sanitary cordon' around the conflict in Syria, which would most probably mean total isolation of the regime, both in Damascus as well as of all sorts of rebels. This strategy, tentatively referred to as zero diplomatic support, no military supply and zero tolerance for violations of insulation (Syrian war), would aim at the situation where the war in Syria would have to burn from the inside out. This would certainly occur relatively quickly, provided that the various external forces would not continue to engage in supporting the parties of the conflict. This strategy has, however, already met with criticism. Its opponents (which seems reasonable) argue that since such countries as Russia, Iran, Turkey and even Saudi Arabia do not intend to stop interference in the conflict in Syria, any insulation of the U.S. (or even the West) does not make any sense. There is also the issue of the fight against the Islamic State, as well as the Kurdish problem; both of these challenges are not going to resolve themselves without the constructive involvement of the Western powers led by the U.S. The first announcements by the president-elect suggested that a change in Washington's approach to the issue of Syria would start from ceasing the indiscriminate support of the units and groups fighting against the regime of Bashar al-Assad, and the priority for U.S. in Syria would become the issue of the fight against Islamic extremists from IS, Al- Qaeda, etc. This in turn may mean further rapprochement of the U.S. with the Kurds, and thus increased tension in relations with Turkey. Certainly, the problem of Syria will be much more difficult to address for the new president than other regional issues in the Middle East.

Americans against Islamic extremism and terrorism – a return to the status quo ante?

There are clear signs that after nearly a decade of experimentation to combat threats to the security of the United States coming from Islamic extremists with the use of milder procedures, means and tactics along with an attempt of a 'reset with Islam', the U.S. under its new president would return to the old, and what is important, proven and effective methods of action developed at the dawn of the so-called long war with jihad (The Long War – the term coined in 2001 by the then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld).

Activities in this area will certainly be carried out in two ways: in the sphere of internal policy (Homeland Defense), and external action. The first one will include the implementation of Trump's most flagship announcements from the period of the campaign, especially such as taking U.S. citizenship away from persons convicted of belonging to Islamist organizations

or their active support for IS and Al-Qaeda. He also advocated closing down of Islamic religious and cultural centers in the United States which promote ideology of hatred or recruit to the IS. The new U.S. administration may also seek to restore procedures (negated and discredited during the reign of Barack Obama) for the operation of special services aimed at obtaining important national security information in the course of an investigation. The fight against the threat of Islamism in the United States under the 'home front' under the new administration might radically change this time in terms of its concept and ideology. While Trump will not withdraw from his major announcements in this regard, America will likely begin to identify its opponent as radical, fundamentalist Islam, which draws its ideological and political inspiration directly from the Koran and Islamic sunna (tradition). During Obama's administration, it was unthinkable, and numerous Muslim organizations and associations lobbying for the recognition of any criticism of Islam and extremism as 'hate speech', were often hosted even in the White House.

Considering the external aspect, U.S. policy towards Islamist threats would likely include further, far-reaching strengthening of activities and the role of special forces in foreign operations and intensification of surgical attacks using drones (perhaps even with the expansion of the geographic scope of their activities for other parts of the world). It may be concluded from Donald Trump's statements that his future administration may take greater zeal in the fight against the Islamic State in Syria (Levant) and North Africa (Libya, Mali), as well as in other regions and dimensions (e.g. in cyberspace).

Conclusions and recommendations

1. Polish authorities should carefully and critically observe the announcements by President-elect Donald Trump and first actions of his team. This applies firstly to issues relating directly to the Polish security, such as fulfilling plans to strengthen the eastern flank of NATO, increasing the presence of U.S. forces in Eastern Europe, the U.S. relationship with Russia and Europe.
2. It is also important to pay attention to plans and first steps of the new U.S. administration towards other global issues, including the Middle East – a region being a natural center of Islamic terrorism. Poland should remind the new U.S. government about our commitment in Afghanistan, Iraq, etc. We should emphasize our support for U.S. actions,

even when they exposed us to criticism and ostracism in the near European environment (the case of the intervention in Iraq in 2003).

3. At the same time, it is worth to emphasize and articulate Polish experience in allied activities and cooperation with the United States (not only in the context of the Middle East and the fight against Islamic extremism and terrorism), as well as our readiness to continue cooperation with the Americans in this regard.

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