

The Trump Administration's National Strategy for Counterterrorism: Overview and Comparison to the Prior Administration

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On October 4, 2018, President Trump released his Administration's first [National Strategy for Counterterrorism](#). The overarching goal of the strategy is to "[defeat the terrorists who threaten America's safety, prevent future attacks, and protect our national interests](#)." In describing the need for this strategy, National Security Advisor John Bolton stated that the terrorist "[landscape is more fluid and complex than ever](#)" and that the strategy will not "[focus on a single organization but will counter all terrorists with the ability and intent to harm the United States, its citizens and our interests](#)." The strategy states that a "*new approach*" will be implemented containing six primary thematic areas of focus: (1) pursuing terrorists to their source; (2) isolating terrorists from their sources of support; (3) modernizing and integrating the United States' counterterrorism authorities and tools; (4) protecting American infrastructure and enhancing resilience; (5) countering terrorist radicalization and recruitment; and (6) strengthening the counterterrorism abilities of U.S. international partners. In announcing the strategy, President Trump stated, "[When it comes to terrorism, we will do whatever is necessary to protect our Nation](#)."

In contrast, former President Obama's final [National Strategy for Counterterrorism](#), published on June 28, 2011, primarily focused on global terrorist threats emanating from Al Qaeda and associated entities. The overarching goal of this strategy was to "[disrupt, dismantle, and eventually defeat Al Qaeda and its affiliates and adherents to ensure the security of our citizens and interests](#)." This strategy stated that the "preeminent security threat to the United States continues to be from Al Qaeda and its affiliates and adherents." The strategy focused on the threats posed by geographic dispersal of Al Qaeda, its affiliates, and adherents, and identified principles that would guide United States counterterrorism efforts: Adhering to Core Values, Building Security Partnerships, Applying Tools and Capabilities Appropriately, and Building a Culture of Resilience. In announcing the release of this strategy, President Obama included a quote from the speech he gave announcing the killing of Osama Bin Laden, "[As a country, we will never tolerate our security being threatened, nor stand idly by when our people have been killed. We will be relentless in defense of our citizens and our friends and allies. We will be true to the values that make us who we are. And on nights like this one, we can say to those families who have lost loved ones to Al Qaeda's terror: Justice has been done](#)."

Since President Trump's Counterterrorism Strategy was published, many security observers have pointed to the

similarities and differences between the two Administration's approaches to counterterrorism. [Table 1](#), below, presents the language contained in each strategy identifying major thematic aspects of the two counterterrorism strategies.

Table 1. Comparison of Trump and Obama Counterterrorism Strategies

Focus Area	Trump 2018 Strategy	Obama 2011 Strategy
Threat Actors	Numerous radical Islamists, revolutionaries, nationalists, separatists, and domestic groups.	Al Qaeda and its affiliates and adherents.
Geographic Focus	Global (including the United States)	Global (including the United States)
Primary Entities Responsible for Addressing the Threat	U.S. military, law enforcement, intelligence community, civilian government institutions, private sector, civil society, and international partners, and the American people.	U.S. Intelligence Community, military, law enforcement, allies, partners, and multilateral institutions.
Core Principles Pursued to Counter the Threat	Pursue terrorists at their source; isolate terrorists from financial, material, and logistical support; modernize and integrate counterterrorism tools and authorities; protect U.S. infrastructure and enhance preparedness; counter radicalization and recruitment; and strengthen the abilities of international partners.	Adhering to U.S. values, building security partnerships, applying counterterrorism tools and capabilities appropriately, and building a culture of resilience.
Balancing Terrorism-Related Activities and Safeguarding Rights	By sharing identity information and exploiting publicly available information, such as social media, the U.S. will identify these terrorists and enable law enforcement action against them in their home countries. In these efforts, the U.S. will take appropriate steps to protect privacy, civil rights, and civil liberties.	By ensuring that counterterrorism policies and tools are narrowly tailored and applied to achieve specific, concrete security gains, the United States will optimize its security and protect the liberties of its citizens.

Desired End State

The terrorist threat to the United States is eliminated, borders and all ports of entry into the United States are secure against terrorist threat, terrorism, radical Islamic ideologies, and other violent extremist ideologies do not undermine the American way of life, and foreign partners address terrorist threat so that these threats do not jeopardize the collective interests of the United States and our partners.

To defeat Al Qaeda, we must define with precision and clarity who we are fighting, setting concrete and realistic goals tailored to the specific challenges we face in different regions of the world. As we apply every element of American power against Al Qaeda, success requires a strategy that is consistent with U.S. core values as a nation and as a people.

Source: Comparison offered by CRS.