



Ending the Wars Responsibly

The president who takes office in January 2021 will face ongoing U.S. military involvement and humanitarian crises around the world, particularly in Afghanistan and Iraq but also in armed conflicts across the Middle East. Despite conflict fatigue at home, ending direct U.S. military involvement will not “end the wars” and will lead to profound consequences for innocent civilians. A more responsible approach will require a commitment to lead with diplomacy, enhance transparency, and develop a more sustainable and resilient approach to ongoing threats, including terrorism.



In the nearly two decades since the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the United States military has been involved in constant combat operations across the Middle East. The 2003 invasion of Iraq, the nearly constant regional turmoil, and ongoing missions in Afghanistan and Syria have all contributed to a sense that the United States is now engaged in “forever wars” and there appears to be no end or “victory” in sight.

There are very real consequences to this continuous engagement. Next year will mark two full decades of the U.S.-led wars—conflicts that have cost nearly 8,500 American and coalition lives and led to hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths in the broader Middle East and South Asia.¹ More than \$1.9 trillion of American taxpayer money has been spent fighting in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria over the past 20 years.² Moreover, the United States will spend up to \$1 trillion more providing medical care and other benefits to those who have borne the burden of these wars.³

Beyond the human and financial costs of these conflicts, there continue to be serious questions about the effectiveness of U.S. strategy—especially with respect to U.S. counterterrorism efforts. Terrorist threats have endured and evolved over the past two decades despite massive U.S. investment and prioritization. While the United States obliterated the core al-Qaida organization that attacked the United States on September 11, new threats sharing the same ideology emerged in Yemen,⁴ West Africa,⁵ Iraq, and Syria.⁶ Even more notable, violent white supremacist terrorism has killed as many Americans in the United States since 9/11 as has Salafi-jihadi terrorism.⁷ Nonetheless, the shadow of 9/11 still looms large for many Americans, as do terrorist attacks by Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaida-linked terrorists in places such as France and Germany.⁸ Like the United States, many of these countries also struggle to counter violence perpetrated by far-right extremists.⁹

President Barack Obama attempted to turn the page on the “war on terror” during his presidency, arguing that the United States had to “define the nature and scope of this struggle, or else it will define us.”¹⁰ But the rise of new terrorist threats such as the Islamic State group in Iraq and Syria, as well as the persistence of existing ones such as al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula, obstructed this goal. While the Obama administration ultimately surged and then withdrew most U.S. troops from Afghanistan, a persistent Taliban threat and a fractured Afghan government prevented the complete drawdown of U.S. military forces. At the same time, wars, conflicts, and crises impinging on U.S. interests continued or erupted in places such as Syria, Ukraine, and Venezuela.

The Trump administration has done little to resolve these conflicts or responsibly end direct U.S. military involvement in places such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. Instead, the administration has come perilously close to embroiling the United States in another war thanks to its “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran and its strike on Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani. Civil wars in Syria and Yemen continue, while Iraq struggles to find stability nearly three years after the conventional military defeat of the Islamic State group. Even the administration’s Afghanistan agreement appears fragile, with implementation stalled amid a surge in Taliban attacks.¹¹

The next administration will face a number of ongoing or potential conflicts, including:

- **Ongoing direct U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq:** When the next administration begins, tens of thousands of American military personnel will likely remain in or near these active combat zones. Even if the Trump administration’s withdrawal agreement with the Taliban were to proceed as planned, the United States would likely still have thousands of troops deployed in Afghanistan in January 2021. Likewise, thousands of U.S. troops will likely remain deployed in Iraq and Syria to continue the fight against the remnants of the Islamic State group and to assist local forces.
- **Continued confrontation with Iran:** As a result of the Trump administration’s withdrawal from the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement, Tehran is now closer to a nuclear weapon than it was just a few short years ago. Moreover, Iran remains a destabilizing force across the Middle East, supporting proxies and prolonging conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen.
- **Ongoing conflicts and humanitarian crises in Libya, Yemen, and Syria:** Barring unexpected diplomatic breakthroughs, conflicts in Libya, Yemen, and Syria will almost certainly continue into January 2021. Though U.S. involvement remains indirect, these conflicts implicate U.S. national interests and reflect wider geopolitical challenges involving Russia, Turkey, and, in the cases of Yemen and Syria, Iran.
- **A persistent and evolving terror threat:** The threat of terrorism from groups such as the Islamic State and al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula remains a significant security challenge for the United States, its allies, and its partners around the world. Though these two particular groups have seen their power decline substantially over the past several years, they remain able to take advantage of conflicts in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and Yemen—and the pandemic could present greater threats moving forward. Meanwhile, the threat of violent white supremacy is on the rise in the United States and around the world.

The overmilitarization of U.S. foreign policy over the past two decades has failed to end these conflicts. The next administration will confront all of these enduring challenges and conflicts, except in an even more unfavorable geopolitical environment. The current administration's actions have fractured U.S. alliances, damaged its diplomatic capacity, and left American credibility in tatters. Making matters worse, the United States and the world will still be in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and face deep economic challenges when the next administration begins in 2021.

It is important to acknowledge that it will not be possible to “end the wars” in the first 100 days of the next administration. The national security team, whether new or incumbent, will also need to recognize that ending direct U.S. military involvement will not end these conflicts. Even if American troops were to leave Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan on the first day of the next administration's term in office, these conflicts would continue to rage with profound consequences for innocent civilians. However, the next administration can begin to set the conditions necessary to resolve these conflicts and put U.S. strategy on a more balanced and sustainable footing. This will need to take place in the context of a dramatic reorientation of U.S. foreign policy toward addressing modern challenges—including climate change, China, and the resurgence of authoritarianism.

To reorient American foreign policy and set the conditions necessary to resolve these legacy conflicts successfully, the next administration should start work immediately on four main lines of effort:

1. Lead with diplomacy to resolve legacy conflicts and avoid new wars.
2. Implement a more sustainable and resilient counterterrorism approach.
3. Ensure that all U.S. military operations are transparent and accountable to the American people.
4. Take better care of the generations that served in our wars.

The recommendations that follow provide a range of options for advancing these goals.

Lead with diplomacy to resolve legacy conflicts and avoid new wars

Wars will not end or be prevented without smart, principled diplomacy as the leading edge of U.S. foreign policy and national security strategy. In recent years, U.S. national security decision-making and public discourse on conflicts has been overly framed around troop levels and American involvement rather than what the United States should or should not do to help bring these conflicts to sustainable conclusions.¹² Those serving in uniform need to have confidence in their purpose, as well as a clear understanding of their mission and what diplomatic ends they are working toward.

Real diplomacy has largely taken a back seat in the Trump administration. Pragmatic diplomacy with Iran has been abandoned for an ineffective and dangerous “maximum pressure” campaign that has not worked.¹³ Instead, it has damaged U.S. interests, left key international allies caught in the crossfire, failed to address Iran’s destabilizing behavior, and increased the chances for yet another major military conflict in the Middle East.¹⁴ Even with respect to Afghanistan, where the administration seems intent on ending U.S. military engagement largely for political purposes,¹⁵ it has been inconsistent in its support for peace efforts, with the president himself often undercutting his own negotiators and sending counterproductive signals to the Taliban and the Afghan government.¹⁶ Meanwhile, U.S. policy on Syria remains a confused muddle of objectives and mismatched means,¹⁷ and the administration is missing a huge opportunity to recalibrate the U.S. relationship with Iraq in the wake of the defeat of IS, instead subjugating Iraq policy to Iran policy.

To make matters worse on the diplomatic front, the Trump administration has spent the past four years actively dismantling the U.S. Department of State and reducing America’s diplomatic capacity to its lowest point in generations.¹⁸ Senior foreign and civil service officers have departed, often after being pushed out or sidelined. The next administration will be faced with the challenge of restoring international faith in U.S. diplomacy while, at the same time, confronting a massive human capital deficit to execute that diplomacy. Recalibrating the United States’ approach will take longer than 100 days, but the next administration can take some definitive early steps to chart a new course.



OVERARCHING POLICY:

Task the secretary of state to lead a rapid and wide-ranging 90-day interagency policy review of U.S. involvement in existing conflicts

The goal of this review should be to examine policy where the United States is either militarily involved or where instability affects U.S. national security interests. Putting the secretary of state in the lead, rather than the White House, would empower the State Department and ensure that U.S. interagency efforts are aligned with, and support, diplomatic goals. The broad goal of this review would be to examine how to rebalance U.S. strategy across these conflict areas. This review should include the following:

- A careful examination of long-term U.S. national interests and policy objectives in these conflict areas in the context of broader U.S. domestic and national security challenges
- An evaluation of the effectiveness of current national security tools and resources being used—or not used—to advance those interests
- A U.S. diplomatic game plan to advance long-term, peace-building efforts in key areas of conflict—such as Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya—with an eye toward what is realistic and sustainable
- High-level outreach to the country’s closest allies and partners for insight into U.S. policy successes and failures, expectations, and burden-sharing
- Engagement with on-the-ground stakeholders in countries where conflicts persist—for example, nongovernmental organizations, U.N. agencies, and local civil society organizations



OVERARCHING POLICY:

Launch a comprehensive review of U.S. foreign and security assistance in key conflict areas

This review would be led by the secretary of state and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) administrator, in coordination with the secretary of defense. Its goal would be to produce a long-term U.S. assistance strategy that better supports peace-building and civil society, rather than prioritizing arms sales or legacy security assistance programs that have done little to stabilize or resolve the underlying causes of these conflicts. This should be done in tandem with the policy review outlined above

as well as efforts to ultimately design and release a National Diplomatic Strategy in 2022. (see the section on “Rebuilding and Rebalancing Our National Security Tools and Institutions” in this report) This review should provide the next administration with concrete options to shift U.S. foreign and security assistance toward more effective, sustainable objectives that better reflect U.S. values and long-term interests.

- **Work with Congress to prioritize passing a State Department authorization bill.**

Congress has not passed State Department authorization legislation since 2002.¹⁹ New authorizing legislation would offer both the next administration and the next Congress an important opportunity to reexamine and prioritize the role of the State Department in U.S. foreign policy. The next administration should work directly with Congress to design and pass such a bill. The development of a National Diplomatic Strategy that outlines U.S. diplomatic priorities would be helpful in promoting a coherent narrative to congressional authorizers.



OVERARCHING POLICY:

Issue a presidential policy directive in the first 100 days outlining a new U.S. policy toward Iran that de-escalates tensions and generates better conditions to advance U.S. interests through diplomacy

The next administration will need to take early tangible steps to accomplish this goal. This effort must include unilateral steps, but more importantly, it should involve direct coordination with allies and partners around the world. Leading up to this new directive, the administration should undertake the following steps:

- **Revoke the Trump administration’s National Security Policy Memorandum (NSPM) 11 on day one of the next administration.**²⁰ The next administration should signal an immediate shift in its approach toward Iran by revoking the policy withdrawing the United States from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on Iran’s nuclear program.
- **Task the director of national intelligence with an assessment on the current status of Iran’s nuclear and ballistic missile programs and its compliance with the JCPOA.** It will be essential to have an accurate picture on the status of Iran’s nuclear and ballistic missile programs to inform its strategy on reentering the JCPOA. The United States should also engage the International Atomic Energy Agency on the status of Iran’s compliance.

- **Launch immediate secretary of state consultations with the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council plus Germany (P5+1) to craft a way forward for the United States to reenter the JCPOA and to bring Iran back into compliance.** The goal of this effort should be to leverage U.S. reentry into the deal within a broader negotiating agenda, including extending some nuclear constraints under the JCPOA as well as imposing limitations on Iran's ballistic missile capability. As part of an agreement by Iran to return to compliance with the JCPOA, the United States should consider sanctions waivers, including on oil.
- **The secretary of defense should undertake a regional posture review with the objective of right-sizing U.S. military presence in the Middle East.** The Trump administration's decision to augment the U.S. military presence in the Middle East has been relatively ineffective in deterring Iran. Rather, Iran and its regional proxies have actually increased the scope of attacks by targeting oil tankers in the Gulf and Saudi oil facilities.²¹ While the United States should ensure that it is capable of defending its allies and interests in the region, a reduced and more sustainable U.S. force posture is both necessary and achievable, especially in light of other competing national security priorities.²² Any reduction in U.S. forces should be paired with a more focused investment in Gulf defense, in line with the 2015 U.S.-Gulf Cooperation Council summit declaration.²³
- **Explore and support nascent dialogue between Iran and the Gulf.** The next administration should send early signals to U.S. Gulf partners that it supports their stated desire to de-escalate tensions with Iran. While the United States playing a public role in dialogue may not be desirable, the next administration should conduct quiet outreach to establish a shared understanding of the situation in the Gulf, chart a path forward for de-escalation, and ensure effective diplomatic coordination of these efforts—perhaps supported by the P5+1 mechanism.
- **Appoint a U.S. special envoy for Yemen.** In recent months, key U.S. partners in the Gulf have signaled their desire to de-escalate tensions with Iran and wind down their direct military involvement in Yemen.²⁴ However, these partners lack the capacity necessary to coordinate the unwieldy diplomacy among the various players involved in Yemen's internal conflict. The next administration should take advantage of these favorable conditions and make an early push for a coordinated diplomatic strategy to bring about a sustainable end to the fighting in Yemen. It should choose a high-level envoy—or, alternatively, select a senior diplomat with regional experience—to serve as the assistant secretary for Near Eastern affairs. The president and secretary of state should empower this envoy to engage with the various parties involved in Yemen,

ranging from the United Nations' own special envoy and various U.S. regional partners such as Oman, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Saudi Arabia to the multiple internal factions vying for power in Yemen.



OVERARCHING POLICY:

Reach a new strategic understanding with Iraq

U.S.-Iraq relations have suffered from a U.S. strategy that has treated the partnership and Iraq's own stability as subordinate concerns to its pressure campaign against Iran.²⁵ This strategy distracts from the fight against IS, risks the expulsion of U.S. forces, neglects civilian aspects of U.S. policy, and badly damages ties. This, along with the advent of a favorably disposed new Iraqi prime minister, presents the opportunity to reset ties. The next administration should articulate that America's mission in Iraq is centered around fighting IS and helping Iraqis achieve stability and sovereignty—not to “watch Iran” or “take the oil.”²⁶ The next administration should put the U.S.-Iraq relationship on a new footing by undertaking the following actions in its first 100 days:



QUICK WIN: Invite Iraqi leaders to Washington. The next U.S. administration should make a point to welcome key Iraqi leaders and work with Congress on a strategy to leverage U.S. nonmilitary assistance to push the Iraqi government to help resettle the hundreds of thousands of Iraqis who remain displaced and provide stability in formerly IS-held areas to help prevent a resurgence.

- **Renegotiate a smaller, more sustainable U.S. troop presence in Iraq and multilateralize the security mission.** The United States should seek to reach a new understanding—directly or indirectly via Iraqi politicians—with Tehran and Iranian-backed Iraqi militias regarding the U.S. troop presence in the country. While missions such as support for the elite Counter-Terrorism Service should remain U.S.-led, the United States should work with NATO allies and partners to multilateralize other elements of the security mission, including the training of Iraqi army and police units. This could allow for a smaller troop presence reached in agreement with Iraqi officials, while also lowering tensions with Iran.
- **Expedite special immigrant visas for Iraqi and Afghan translators.** The United States should immediately announce this priority effort. This early move would demonstrate a commitment to reversing anti-Muslim policies and would also signal that America is not abandoning the Iraqi and Afghan people.

- **Incentivize Iraq-Saudi rapprochement.** Diplomatically, the United States should also seek to deliver on the promise of recent Saudi rapprochement with Iraqi national leaders, completing the transition from promising diplomacy to delivering on the pledge to help Iraq's young and fast-growing population find opportunity.



OVERARCHING POLICY:

Implement a responsible strategy on Afghanistan that prioritizes long-term support for the Afghan people

The next administration will likely see a peace process in midstream, with early decision points on the deadline for withdrawal of all U.S. forces by May 2021. The national security team will need to assess a range of factors when deciding how to best proceed regarding U.S. military presence as well as U.S. financial support for the Afghan government. Bringing U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan to a close should be a priority, but any strategy will also need to adequately address the risks to the Afghan people as well as long-term stability in the region. While progress will take longer than 100 days, there are some key early steps that the next administration should take, including the following actions:



QUICK WIN: Host a leader-level secure video conference with the Afghan government. The goal of this initial summit would be to reinforce a long-term U.S. commitment to the Afghan people and communicate expectations for continued diplomatic progress on power-sharing.

- **Consider keeping in place the U.S. special envoy for Afghanistan and announce the administration's intent to remain committed to the February 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement.** This could allow for greater continuity in peace negotiations.
- **Plan to end significant U.S. military presence in May 2021 in accordance with existing U.S.-Taliban peace agreements, continued review of the threat environment, and other pressing national priorities.** The next administration should plan to continue reductions to the U.S. military presence pursuant to existing U.S.-Taliban peace agreements, provided that conditions allow it.
- **Commit to a multiyear U.S. foreign and security assistance package for Afghanistan beginning in the FY 2022 presidential budget submission to Congress in February 2021.** The FY 2022 presidential budget submission should demonstrate a clear commitment to U.S. foreign and security assistance for Afghanistan.

- **Use the G-7 summit in summer 2021 to announce a major international compact to provide long-term support to Afghan women.** The United States has historically played an important role in protecting and supporting rights for Afghan women and girls since the beginning of the conflict in 2001. But recent U.S. actions and policy have failed to prioritize their concerns or guarantee women’s rights during peace negotiations.²⁷ The next administration should use the next G-7 summit to pledge to protect gains made for women and girls in the country, ensure that women are meaningfully represented in future talks, and announce a plan for long-term support to Afghan women.



OVERARCHING POLICY:

Reset on Israel-Palestine issues

The unresolved conflict between Israelis and Palestinians presents an insurmountable obstacle to Middle East stability—and stabilizing the Middle East could allow the United States to responsibly reduce its own direct military commitments to the region. While progress on Middle East peace is unlikely in the first 100 days, the next administration should take immediate steps to reset U.S. policy on Israel-Palestine with the goal of generating better conditions for peace negotiations, ensuring that U.S. policy is aligned toward advancing long-term U.S. interests, and promoting the security, prosperity, and dignity of the Israeli and Palestinian peoples. Improving the lives of Israelis and Palestinians on the way to resolving the broader conflict between the two peoples would go a long way toward stabilizing the wider Middle East and North Africa. Moreover, it would help America better calibrate its engagement with a focus on diplomacy.

- **Act to immediately restore U.S. assistance to the Palestinian Authority.** The next administration should reverse the current administration’s cuts to funding for the Palestinian Authority and programs designed to help the Palestinian people. In addition, it should work with Congress to ease or lift existing legislative restrictions on this assistance and create positive incentives for diplomatic progress. As it restores bilateral aid to Palestinians, it should do so in a way that avoids reinforcing anti-democratic tendencies among some Palestinian leaders and addresses the concerns expressed by the Palestinian leadership about corruption.
- **Reopen the U.S. mission to the Palestinian Authority and appoint a senior foreign service officer to head it.** After President Donald Trump moved the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, the State Department shuttered the consulate in East Jerusalem that for decades served as the United States’ main point of contact with the Palestinians.

The next administration should reestablish a diplomatic mission to the Palestinian Authority and appoint a senior diplomat to lead it. At the same time, it should work with Congress to build bipartisan support for steps to allow the Palestine Liberation Organization to reopen the diplomatic mission in Washington that was closed by the current administration.

- **Ensure that regional diplomatic progress does not leave the Israeli-Palestinian conflict behind.** The next administration should use American leverage with all parties to create positive incentives that help make resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in a just and equitable manner a key factor in U.S. diplomacy with countries in the region. Stepped-up regional diplomacy should seek to improve the lives of Israelis and Palestinians alike, while also keeping open the path toward a negotiated agreement.
- **Work with Congress to fully resource the Global Fragility Act.** As it copes with multiple crises demanding high-level attention, the next administration should fully fund the Global Fragility Act passed by Congress in December 2019. The legislation authorizes \$1.15 billion in funding over five years, dedicated to supporting programs to prevent conflicts before they start and the United States and others feel compelled to intervene.²⁸

Implement a more sustainable and resilient counterterrorism approach

For the United States to move effectively beyond “forever wars,” the next administration will have to wrestle with how best to confront and manage a persistent and evolving terrorism threat. The Obama administration made important gains by wiping out core al-Qaida structures and by imposing greater transparency, stricter decision-making processes around direct action, and accountability—even when controversially seeking congressional authorization to strike chemical weapons in Syria. Over time, the Obama administration also implemented a more targeted approach, building the capacity of partner countries around the world to take on terrorism threats as they emerged, rather than through large U.S. military ground operations.²⁹

Unfortunately, much of this progress with regard to decision-making on use of force, transparency, and accountability has been reversed under the Trump administration. Despite its stated desire to get the United States out of endless wars, the Trump administration has set the political and security conditions for greater conflict by expanding the authority of the military to conduct increased operational targeting against a broader range of terrorist groups. At the same time, the administration’s decisions have made the country less safe—decisions such as demoting the homeland security adviser position at the White House and leaving the U.S. Department of Homeland Security without several rungs of permanent leadership.

The next administration will be confronted with an exhausted counterterrorism strategy. After more than two decades of counterterrorism operations worldwide across three administrations, the metrics for success remain unclear and the strategic impact has been uneven. Incidents of terrorism remain high for a few countries, mostly those with active hostilities, but have decreased substantially in Western countries. Yet the conditions that give rise to terrorism persist across the globe, especially in the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa. The next administration will need to examine whether the threat justifies the scale of U.S. counterterrorism infrastructure, resources, and operations that has dominated U.S. national security strategy since 9/11.

Meanwhile, the devastating human consequences inflicted by both terrorists and ongoing counterterrorism operations continue to mount. Although the Trump administration has reduced its transparency in reporting civilian harm, casualties have likely gone up.³⁰ While the Pentagon admitted to killing 132 civilians last year in U.S. operations,³¹ estimates from independent watchdog groups were much higher. For example, when airstrikes in Somalia tripled from 14 in 2016 to 45 in 2018,³² the Pentagon claimed no civilians were killed, while Amnesty International documented at least 17 deaths.³³ And in Afghanistan, the United States and its allies killed more civilians than the Taliban in the first half of 2019,³⁴ while overall civilian casualties remained above 10,000 for the sixth year in a row.³⁵ Meanwhile, U.S. support for security partners that use American weapons and equipment to enable civilian harm is not even officially counted—such as in Yemen, where the civilian death toll surpassed 1,100 last year.³⁶



OVERARCHING POLICY:

Announce a high-level policy review, led by the vice president, on the future U.S. counterterrorism strategy, with the goal of generating options for a more sustainable and resilient approach

This policy review should assess the terrorism threat in the context of other pressing national security challenges. In addition, it should seek to right-size U.S. strategy, resource allocation, and decision-making processes while still preserving adequate capacity to defend the homeland from attacks.

- **Task the secretary of state, the director of national intelligence (DNI), the secretary of homeland security, and the secretary of defense with a U.S. Counterterrorism Structure and Posture Review to streamline U.S. counterterrorism efforts.** This review would examine ways to streamline U.S. counterterrorism infrastructure across the U.S. government and present options to the president within 90 days. There are currently multiple overlapping counterterrorism missions and infrastructure across the U.S. government that not only produce duplicative efforts but also generate incentive structures to sustain this overweighted effort in comparison to other national security challenges.
- **Launch a presidential study directive (PSD) to develop options to improve U.S. resilience to terrorism.** This PSD should explore how to improve crisis communications, increase civic engagement in the aftermath of terror attacks, harden critical infrastructure, reform the Department of Homeland Security's mission, and strengthen local law enforcement capabilities.

- **Use a presidential speech on the 20th anniversary of 9/11 to announce a new U.S. counterterrorism strategy that prioritizes sustainability and resilience.** This speech could coincide with a leaders' summit in New York that would announce a new global compact on counterterrorism prioritizing intelligence, law enforcement, international cooperation, and resilience over military action. The policy reviews above would inform this speech.
- **Stand up a White House-led task force to develop a U.S. government (USG)-wide policy blueprint in the first 100 days for countering violent white supremacy at home and abroad.** Attacks by violent white supremacists are on the rise at home and abroad.³⁷ The next administration must examine the threat and determine a USG-wide strategy for countering this challenge that would involve elements of law enforcement, intelligence, civil liberty protections, education, and international diplomacy. This review should include members of the National Security Council (NSC), Domestic Policy Council, and other White House offices in order to ensure a broad U.S. policy approach.

Ensure that all U.S. military operations are transparent and accountable to the American people

From Vietnam to Libya to Yemen, successive administrations have struggled to provide adequate transparency to the American people about the ways in which the United States uses military force.³⁸ This lack of transparency inhibits accountability, as reflected in the existing legal frameworks that justify the use of force. When America uses force in a way that is not transparent and accountable, it undermines U.S. national security.

These problems predated the Trump administration, but the Trump administration has made them worse. From pardoning convicted war criminal Eddie Gallagher and changing authorities for counterterrorism operations to an overall lack of transparency on the part of the U.S. Department of Defense, the Trump administration has made it much more difficult for Americans and the world to trust that the U.S. government is executing the use of force responsibly and in accordance with the rule of law and international norms.³⁹

Acting transparently, legally, and with express congressional authorization is a critical predicate for the development of policies that are sustainable, effective, and garner the widest possible support from the American people and the international community. When administrations disregard these guardrails, they risk drifting into and failing to extract the United States from imprudent wars, while also undermining constitutional design in ways that erode the legitimacy of U.S. foreign policy at home and abroad. Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay, undisclosed drone strikes, and the assassination of Gen. Soleimani all seed deep suspicion about U.S. activities, fuel anti-Americanism, and isolate America from the rest of the world.

The next administration will have much work to do to reestablish confidence that the United States will exercise use of force in accountable and transparent ways. It will have to move quickly to restore trust with the American people and foreign partners, reassuring them of America's ability to lawfully and transparently employ its military for essential operations. This effort will require working closely with Congress and publicly announcing new initiatives in the first 100 days.



QUICK WIN: Reinstate reporting requirements on counterterrorism activities

(Executive Order 13732). The next administration should immediately reinstate the part of Executive Order 13732—issued by President Obama and revoked by President Trump through Executive Order 13862—that requires public reporting on the casualties caused by counterterrorism strikes.⁴⁰ This information is important for transparency and ensures that all U.S. agencies involved in counterterrorism have visibility into the effects of their actions.



QUICK WIN: Appoint a senior civilian reporting directly to the secretary of defense to conduct investigations into civilian deaths as a result of U.S. military operations.

This official would be responsible for oversight of U.S. policy on civilian casualties and would provide the mandate to improve the standards for investigations into these incidents.



QUICK WIN: Standardize the Defense Department's monthly publication of U.S. casualties in named military operations.

Transparency in U.S. operations and resulting civilian harm is critical to helping the United States and the public learn from mistakes and improve U.S. practice. Regular publication would demonstrate the next administration's commitment to transparency and taking civilian harm seriously.

- **Work with Congress to repeal and replace the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force.** Any authorization should seek to impose strict geographical and targeting limits with clear sunset and renewal provisions. The goal should be to more tightly bind use of force to regular affirmations of public consensus via congressional debate and votes. The next administration should send a strong signal by expressing its willingness to be more bound by Congress on use of force. It should pursue this legislative push in tandem with its diplomatic strategy reviews in order to reinforce a shift in U.S. strategy toward diplomacy.
- **Tighten the policy and legal boundaries for direct lethal action in U.S. counterterrorism operations.** During the Obama administration, the Presidential Policy Guidance served as a set of procedures and guidelines for approving use of direct force—both lethal and nonlethal—against terrorist targets.⁴¹ In 2017, however, the Trump administration took steps to loosen many of these procedures and guidelines.⁴² The next administration should review the status of current procedures and set out strict policy criteria for use of lethal direct action against designated terrorist targets, ensuring that nonlethal direct action is prioritized, that the authorities for direct action are not designated at any level below the secretary of defense, that there is an extensive policy review and accountability process, and that any lethal action meets the highest possible standards.

- **Launch an NSC-led review of civilian harm in U.S. military operations and security partnerships.** The review should include procedures to mandate assessments of a security partner’s capacity, capability, and political will to protect civilians in military operations before providing U.S. security assistance. It should also consider what conditions on training, equipment, and other support can be put in place based on partner forces’ commitment to and performance on key civilian protection indicators. In addition, the review should explore the use of “positive conditionality” with partners in order to incentivize better civilian protection behavior.⁴³
- **Review the current administration’s rewriting of the U.S. Conventional Arms Transfer Policy.** The next administration should review NSPM 10 to ensure that it prioritizes human rights protections and provides guidance against transferring weapons to states with concerning human rights records.⁴⁴

Take better care of the generations that served in our wars

Since September 11, 2001, more than 3 million men and women in uniform have deployed overseas in support of the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria.⁴⁵ According to official Department of Defense statistics, more than 53,000 members of the U.S. Armed Forces have been wounded in action in these conflicts,⁴⁶ with more than 1.2 million post-9/11 veterans now receiving service-connected disability payments.⁴⁷

As a result, the annual budget of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has risen from \$48 billion in FY 2001 to \$243 billion in FY 2021—the second-largest budget of any federal agency, greater than the combined budgets for the State Department, the USAID, the Justice Department, and the entire U.S. intelligence community.⁴⁸ This rapid increase in VA funding can be attributed to a number of factors, including the aging of a large cohort of Vietnam War veterans, increasing use of the VA by all generations for health care, increased general health care costs, new programs such as the post-9/11 GI Bill, and vastly increased use of VA health and benefits programs by post-9/11 veterans as compared with their predecessors.

Mandatory benefits payments required by law, such as disability and the GI Bill, comprise nearly half the VA's budget. The cost of running the VA's massive health care system of 150 hospitals and more than 800 clinics dominates the other half of the budget.⁴⁹ Due to past commitments and policy decisions—and a national obligation to fulfill these commitments—the VA's budget will likely continue to expand. Although the total national veteran population continues to shrink as a consequence of the move to a smaller all-volunteer force, the proportion of veterans using the VA for health care or benefits continues to increase. As a result, future administrations will likely need to continue increasing the size of the VA budget for the foreseeable future.



QUICK WIN: The president should consider appointing a female combat veteran to be the secretary of the Veterans Administration. Since the VA was elevated to Cabinet status in 1989, the post has been held by 10 men. Once confirmed, the new VA secretary should prioritize issues of health and access for women veterans, who make up the fastest-growing segment of the veteran population.

- **Take VA privatization off the table.** Once confirmed, the next VA secretary should make a public statement—whether in a major speech, policy directive, or other appropriate vehicle—that privatization of the VA is no longer under any sort of consideration by the department or its leadership. This determination should be appropriately reflected in the new VA secretary’s budget proposals and documents, which should seek a more appropriate balance between direct care and purchased care.
- **Immediately begin filling the 50,000 positions that are currently empty in the VA and develop a plan for rebuilding the VA’s aging infrastructure.** At the end of 2019, the VA had 50,000 empty positions, leaving VA facilities understaffed.⁵⁰ Moreover, much of the VA’s infrastructure needs to be rebuilt; as of 2018, for instance, the average VA building was 55 years old.⁵¹ Filling these slots and renewing the VA’s infrastructure will enable it not only to expand veterans’ care but also to better fulfill its congressionally mandated fourth mission of contributing to national preparedness.
- **Continue increased remote mental health care, with a focus on suicide prevention and improving access to underserved populations.** The VA has been a leader in telehealth technology and use for years, making it well-positioned to leverage such technology for treatment of patients during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the pandemic, the VA and many other mental health providers have moved to remote care via videoconference services.⁵² These remote services should be continued when the pandemic subsides and should be leveraged to more fully reach those veterans that the VA does not serve adequately today, including rural veterans or veterans who live far from VA facilities. According to the most recent VA statistics, on average, more than 16 veterans committed suicide every day in 2017—and the suicide rate for veterans was 1.5 times the rate for nonveterans that year.⁵³ To help combat mental health challenges among veterans and military personnel more broadly, the next administration should also expand mental health coverage to cover National Guard and Reserve military personnel even if they have not served on active duty.
- **Better serve veterans with “bad paper” and reform the process.** Veterans with “bad paper”—some form of discharge other than an honorable discharge—are disproportionately at risk for unemployment, suicide, and homelessness, among other issues.⁵⁴ The next VA secretary should continue to expand VA health care and crisis support for these veterans, recognizing that many of these discharges were likely affected by underlying causes such as PTSD or military sexual trauma.⁵⁵ A new VA secretary should affirm that the government’s obligations to these veterans does not stop because of these actions.

Conclusion

The next administration will not be able to responsibly end direct U.S. military involvement in conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria in its first 100 days in office. With or without direct U.S. military involvement, many of these conflicts will almost certainly persist for some time. But with these initial steps, the next administration can signal its intent to privilege diplomacy and conflict resolution in U.S. policy and put American strategy on a more sustainable global footing.



New executive orders or policies recommended in the first 100 days:

- Task the secretary of state with leading an interagency policy review of U.S. involvement in existing conflicts.
- Launch a comprehensive review of U.S. foreign and security assistance in key conflict areas.
- Launch a high-level policy review, led by the vice president, on a future U.S. counterterrorism strategy that prioritizes sustainability and resilience.
- Issue a presidential policy directive outlining a new U.S. policy toward Iran that de-escalates tensions.
- Reinstate reporting requirements on civilian casualties resulting from counterterrorism activities—formerly Executive Order 13732.
- Issue new Presidential Policy Guidance to tighten policy and legal boundaries for direct lethal action in U.S. counterterrorism operations.



Executive orders or policies recommended for rescission or removal:

- **2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force** should be repealed and replaced to more tightly bind use of force to regular affirmations of public consensus via congressional debates and votes.
- **National Security Policy Memorandum 10** (“Regarding U.S. Conventional Arms Transfer Policy”) should be reviewed and rewritten to ensure that U.S. arms transfer policy prioritizes human rights concerns effectively.
- **National Security Policy Memorandum 11** (“Ceasing United States Participation in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action”) should be rescinded to signal an immediate shift in U.S. policy toward Iran.
- **Executive Order 13862**: Revokes certain reporting requirements on U.S. counterterrorism activities. These requirements should be reinstated.

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