



CRS Issue Statement on the Middle East

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The Middle East, broadly defined as an area stretching from North Africa to the Persian Gulf, presents an array of challenges to U.S. foreign policy. Although the United States maintains strong relations with several key “moderate” Arab and non-Arab states such as Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Turkey, other state and non-state actors, such as Iran, the Lebanese Shiite group Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Hamas in the Palestinian territories, are aligned against U.S. interests. Hezbollah and Hamas are both U.S. State Department-designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) and have refused to renounce the use of violence against Israel. It is widely believed that Iran continues to seek a nuclear weapons capability, a goal that, if achieved, would have serious proliferation consequences throughout the region. Some observers fear that Israel could preemptively strike Iran and therefore trigger a wider war. Iran also continues its strong ties to Syria, complicating U.S. efforts to peel that Arab state away from its Persian ally.

For decades, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has absorbed the energies of successive Administrations and Members of Congress alike. With renewed U.S. efforts to revive Israeli-Arab peacemaking now stalled, Congress may debate the extent of U.S. involvement in the latest peace process. U.S. Middle East policy has always required policymakers to delicately balance the need for a strong U.S. relationship with Israel with the need to secure vital oil resources in the Persian Gulf and support moderate Arab regimes.

As U.S. troops gradually withdraw from Iraq by 2011, U.S.-Iraqi relations should continue to “normalize,” though U.S. efforts to continue to help Iraq rebuild and attain some degree of self-sufficiency may continue for years to come. In the meantime, Iraq has not rid itself of Al Qaeda-inspired terrorism and remains plagued by age-old ethnic and sectarian cleavages that threaten to destabilize the country should some conflagration occur.

Finally, as evident by the failed 2009 Christmas Day airline bombing, Al Qaeda and its regional affiliates continue to plan attacks against U.S. interests abroad and against the U.S. homeland itself. The Middle East is home to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), located in Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and the Sahel, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), located in Yemen and Saudi Arabia, and Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). The central core of Al Qaeda is still believed to be hiding in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas in Pakistan near the Afghanistan border.

Although the United States remains the world’s lone superpower, its ability to project power in the Middle East has diminished over the last decade. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Abu Ghraib scandal, the international backlash against detentions in Guantanamo Bay, failed U.S. efforts to limit the influence of “radical” countries and non-state actors (such as Iran, Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Hamas in the Palestinian territories), and the global financial crisis all have combined to curb U.S. financial, military, and ideological influence in the broader Middle East. Other foreign powers, notably Russia, China, and the European Union, have attempted to fill the void. Moreover, regional actors themselves, such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey, have taken more responsibility for resolving disputes rather than reflexively deferring to U.S. diplomacy. Overall, it remains to be seen whether and where the Obama Administration and Congress will seek to re-assert U.S. influence in the region.

Through the appropriations process, Congress provides U.S. foreign assistance to several large Middle Eastern recipients. Policymakers have often employed foreign aid to achieve U.S. regional objectives. Foreign aid has been used as leverage to encourage peace between Israel and her Arab neighbors, while strengthening bilateral relationships between the United States and

Israel and between the United States and moderate Arab governments. Foreign aid has worked to cement close military cooperation between the United States and governments in the region, discouraging local states from engaging in uncontrollable arms races. The Middle East CLI team will continue to provide analysis of the foreign operations appropriations process to Congress.

Congress also plays a major role in overseeing U.S. arms sales to Middle Eastern countries. By law, Congress must be notified of any major government-to-government or commercially-licensed arms sale. The 111th Congress may debate U.S. arms sale proposals to Saudi Arabia or other Gulf states. The Middle East CLI team will continue to assist Congress in its oversight of regional arms sales.

- If the Obama Administration continues the push for Middle East peace, how will the 111th Congress respond in light of Palestinian divisions and Hamas' control of the Gaza Strip?
- Given the budget constraints facing the nation, how will the 111th Congress continue to support an array of regional initiatives, such as foreign aid to key strategic partners, democracy promotion, and development assistance?
- Despite U.S. and international sanctions, radical regimes, such as Iran and Syria, continue to persist in pursuing policies counter to U.S. interests. What new tools, if any, may Congress employ to change their behavior?
- To what extent does the United States remain vulnerable, at home and abroad, to terrorist attacks from Al Qaeda-inspired groups? How will policymakers balance counterterrorism strategies with diplomatic strategies for improving U.S. bilateral relationships with Arab regimes?

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