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The Middle East: Selected Issues for the 119th Congress

Developments in the Middle East during 2023 and 2024 transformed the security landscape of the region with profound and still unfolding implications for the United States. Changes in the relative capabilities and influence of Israel, Iran, Arab states, Turkey, and armed nonstate groups may represent an inflection point for the region. Members of the 119th Congress may seek to shape and provide oversight of the policies of the incoming administration toward emerging trends and dynamics, including with regard to U.S. diplomacy, military operations, and foreign assistance.

The October 2023 attack on Israel by Hamas, a Palestinian Sunni Islamist group and U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization (FTO), and Israel's military response and subsequent war with Hamas in and around the Gaza Strip precipitated a series of armed conflicts pitting longtime U.S. adversary Iran and the regional groups it supports against the United States and Israel. As of early 2025, the regional power of Iran appears diminished, with Iran and some of its regional allies militarily weakened. Israeli military action has degraded Hamas and Lebanese Hezbollah (another FTO), and armed opposition groups toppled the Iran-backed regime of Bashar al Assad (alt. Assad) in Syria in December 2024. Iran and Israel had two military exchanges during 2024. In both cases, Iranian attacks were largely thwarted by Israeli and U.S. forces, with apparent support from some Arab governments, and Israeli retaliatory airstrikes in October reportedly caused substantial damage to Iranian air defense and ballistic missile production capabilities, probably increasing Iran's vulnerability to future attack. In response to these developments, the 118th Congress increased military assistance to Israel and humanitarian aid for crises in Gaza and elsewhere, and authorized new sanctions against Iran.

Biden Administration Policy

The Biden Administration initially sought the creation, as stated in the 2022 National Security Strategy, of a "more integrated Middle East that empowers our allies and partners," asserting that it would "advance regional peace and prosperity, while reducing the resource demands the region makes on the United States over the long term." The October 2023 attack on Israel and subsequent regional conflicts seemingly disrupted those plans, at least in the near term. The Biden Administration devoted resources to defending Israel (including deployments of U.S. forces), and deterring and countering Iran and its partners. Before and after the October 2023 attack, the Biden Administration continued previous U.S. efforts (including via the Abraham Accords) to promote improved Israeli relations with Arab states that share an interest in countering Iran's regional influence. Saudi Arabia has conditioned normalization with Israel on an end to the war in Gaza and progress toward the establishment of a Palestinian state.

Selected Issues for the 119th Congress

In considering legislative and oversight tools, Members of the 119th Congress may evaluate regional developments and incoming administration policies. Congress could face potential decisions about additional U.S. and/or Israeli military action against Iran, or negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program or other issues. Congress may also consider options regarding U.S. assistance toward Israel and the Palestinians in light of ongoing conflicts in Gaza, the West Bank, and elsewhere and the potential for improved relations between Israel and other U.S. partners. Additional issues include developments in post-Asad Syria (including with respect to U.S. sanctions and troop deployments); unresolved conflicts and/or governance challenges in Lebanon, Yemen, and Iraq; and the influence of other actors, such as Russia and the People's Republic of China.

Iran

In 2024, the Islamic Republic of Iran faced military and strategic setbacks, largely at the hands of Israel as well as the United States, that appear to dramatically diminish advantages and leverage Tehran had built up over decades. Blows to Iranian regional partners, as well as the reportedly underwhelming performance and uncertain future of Iran's once-vaunted ballistic missile program, suggest that Iran's leaders may no longer be able to rely as much on these traditional asymmetric methods of Iranian power projection. The apparent degradation of Iran's regional allies, and their evident failure to deter direct Israeli military action against Iran, have sparked increasingly public discussion among Iranian policymakers about the future of Iran's strategic calculus, including the possible development of nuclear weapons.

Iranian next steps could create opportunities and risks for the United States. An Iranian attempt to develop nuclear weapons could spur congressional debate over the potential risks and benefits of direct U.S. intervention to reinforce successive Administrations' vows not to allow such weapons. Whether or not in response to U.S. military action, Iran could also carry out attacks in the Gulf, including against U.S. allies, or close the Strait of Hormuz. Iranian leaders could also seek negotiations with the United States on the nuclear program and other issues. Internally, Iran's authoritarian regime appears secure but has faced popular protests in recent years. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei (b. 1939) has no designated successor; the Islamic Republic will face a consequential and perhaps destabilizing moment when his rule ends.

Figures associated with the incoming administration have said that they anticipate a return to "maximum pressure," though it is not clear what forms that pressure might take. At the same time, President-elect Donald Trump has expressed openness to an agreement with Iran.

Considerations for Congress could include further sanctions against Iran; whether or not to authorize and appropriate funding for proposals concerning Iran; oversight of potential negotiations and resulting agreements; and military assistance to Israel and other U.S. partners.

Israel and the Palestinians

Israel's war with Hamas and ensuing regional conflicts between Israel and other Iran-backed groups have broad implications for U.S. policy in the Middle East. Challenges for U.S. officials and lawmakers may include how to bolster Israel's security from threats posed by Iran-supported actors; how to prevent the spread of conflict in the region; how to protect and care for civilians displaced or otherwise affected by the fighting; how to help Israel and Hamas reach a cease-fire agreement for Gaza that secures the return of hostages; and how to reconcile Palestinian desires for statehood and post-conflict recovery with Israeli security priorities and political objectives.

Over decades, the Israeli and U.S. governments have forged close relations in many areas. A 10-year bilateral military aid memorandum of understanding commits the United States to provide Israel \$3.3 billion in Foreign Military Financing and to spend \$500 million annually on joint missile defense programs from FY2019 to FY2028, subject to congressional appropriations. As some U.S.-Israel tensions have surfaced over the Israel-Hamas war, some Members of Congress have increased their scrutiny of Israel's use of U.S. security assistance.

Decisions by the incoming administration and Congress could affect the trajectory of a number of Israeli-Palestinian issues, including security and governance in Gaza and the West Bank, the role of the Palestinian Authority, the potential for Israeli settlement expansion or annexation in the West Bank, and possible negotiations aimed at resolving aspects of Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Trump Administration (2017-2021) addressed some of these issues, including via a 2020 peace plan which Palestinian leaders rejected. Members may review the status of contested West Bank areas and seek to shape dialogue involving Israel, the United States, and Arab states (including Saudi Arabia) about the substance and sequencing of steps to improve Israel-Arab relations in parallel with efforts to address Palestinian demands for self-determination.

Syria

In December 2024, the government of Bashar Al Asad fell after rapid advances by armed opposition groups, the most powerful of which is Hay'at Tahrir al Sham (HTS), a U.S.-designated FTO. HTS leader Ahmed Al Sharaa has taken on a leading public role, giving policy directives, meeting with foreign interlocutors, calling for the maintenance of order and respect for Syria's constituent communities, appearing to acknowledge Israel's security concerns while criticizing its military operations in Syria, and seeking accountability for the former regime's crimes.

Across Syria, different groups retain influence, and their interactions with HTS, interim authorities, and foreign powers are shaping developments and presenting U.S. decision makers with policy questions. In northwestern Syria, the Turkey-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) coalition has seized areas from the U.S.-backed, Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), leading U.S. officials

to advocate for a cease-fire and a "managed transition" of the SDF's role in helping counter the Islamic State (IS) group (an FTO). The Turkish government states that it seeks to counter the SDF because of links Kurdish SDF elements have with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK, an FTO).

Figure 1. Middle East and North Africa



Source: CRS, using State Department and ESRI data.

U.S. officials are in direct contact with HTS leaders and other Syrians to communicate U.S. expectations and pursue U.S. interests. The U.S. Embassy in Damascus suspended operations in 2012, though a senior State Department official visited Damascus in December 2024. Approximately 2,000 U.S. military personnel are present in eastern and southern Syria, conducting counterterrorism missions against IS remnants and supporting the SDF's detention of more than 9,000 IS prisoners and administration of camps for more than 40,000 individuals from formerly IS-held areas.

Instability and Change in the MENA Region

Post-October 2023 developments have implications for U.S. policy across the region. **Lebanon**, already facing an economic crisis and years of political stalemate, has been further challenged by war between Israel and **Hezbollah**. A November 2024 cease-fire halted violence and allowed thousands of displaced people to return to their homes amid questions about the future capabilities and strategies of Hezbollah, which reportedly lost most of its senior leaders and much of its once-vaunted arsenal of missiles and rockets due to Israeli attacks in 2024. Attacks by the **Houthis in Yemen** against Israel, commercial vessels, and U.S. warships in the Red Sea, continue unabated as of early 2025, often drawing airstrikes from the United States, Israel, or other U.S. partners. An uneasy truce has frozen conflict lines in Yemen's decade-long civil war since 2022, but a comprehensive political settlement has proven elusive. In **Iraq**, the United States announced that the counter-IS coalition's mission would end by September 2025, a timeline that may be impacted by the results of Iraqi national elections, expected in 2025. Developments in these countries or elsewhere in the region could raise legislative and oversight issues for Congress, including with respect to sanctions, U.S. military forces, and U.S. foreign assistance.

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