



Updated March 6, 2026

Assisting and Evacuating U.S. Citizens Abroad During International Crises

Congress has mandated that the U.S. Department of State (DOS; the Department) provide consular services to American citizens around the world. Such services include disseminating information regarding any major disaster or incident abroad affecting the safety of U.S. citizens and, when their lives are endangered by such crises, facilitating their safe and efficient evacuation. DOS scaled up consular assistance to U.S. citizens across the Middle East after the United States and Israel launched military operations against Iran on February 28, 2026. Members of Congress are conducting oversight of DOS’s consular response and in some cases have expressed criticism of the timeliness and extent of DOS consular assistance. Some press reports have described factors that are complicating DOS’s work in this area, including airport and airspace closures and flight cancellations throughout the region, along with Iranian attacks targeting U.S. overseas posts in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait.

Travel Information and the STEP Program

Section 43 of the State Department Basic Authorities Act of 1956 (P.L. 84-885; 22 U.S.C. §2715; the BAA) requires DOS to share information on any major disaster or incident overseas affecting the health and safety of U.S. citizens. DOS carries out this responsibility through the Consular Information Program (CIP), which includes a range of products intended to inform U.S. citizens worldwide of potential threats to their health or safety and the availability of consular services (see **Table 1**).

DOS disseminates CIP products through several means, including the Bureau of Consular Affairs’ website for U.S. citizens traveling abroad (<http://travel.state.gov>) and the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP). STEP is a digital service through which U.S. citizens traveling or living abroad can provide their contact information to receive CIP products applicable to any countries they select. While STEP helps overseas posts locate U.S. citizens in an emergency, U.S. citizens are not required to enroll, and DOS generally does not have the means to determine the precise number of U.S. citizens in a foreign country. CIP products are further disseminated through the websites of relevant overseas posts, DOS’s social media accounts, and systems of U.S. citizen volunteers, or “wardens,” who pass information to other U.S. citizens.

DOS had issued varying travel guidance for different Middle East countries prior to February 28 and has issued several CIP products following the onset of U.S. military operations against Iran. For example, after combat operations began on February 28, DOS released a Worldwide Caution advising U.S. citizens in the Middle

East to exercise increased caution and follow security guidance issued by the nearest U.S. embassy or consulate. The Worldwide Caution added that U.S. citizens “may experience travel disruptions due to periodic airspace closures.” That same day, U.S. embassies across the Middle East began issuing Security Alerts providing guidance to U.S. citizens. Some Members of Congress and other stakeholders criticized the timeliness and clarity of DOS’s initial response, arguing that the Department should have begun communicating with U.S. citizens in the region about the evolving security situation there, including by urging them to register with STEP, prior to the start of U.S. military operations. Comments attributed to Administration officials have noted that DOS has long maintained guidance urging U.S. citizens to refrain from traveling to some but not all countries in the Middle East.

Table 1. Selected Consular Information Program (CIP) Products

Product	Description
Worldwide Caution	DOS’s Worldwide Caution, published on travel.state.gov , is updated to provide U.S. citizens information on universal travel risks.
Travel Advisory	Travel Advisories are issued for every country and include guidance regarding country-specific security concerns. Each Travel Advisory is designated at an overall Level ranging from Level 1 (Exercise Normal Precautions) to Level 4 (Do Not Travel).
Alerts (including Security Alerts)	Overseas posts create alerts to notify U.S. citizens within their jurisdiction of relevant safety and security information, often in response to significant events. Depending on the nature of the risk outlined in the Alert, DOS may label it a Security Alert, Demonstration Alert, Weather Alert, or Health Alert.

Source: U.S. Department of State Foreign Affairs Manual.

Overseas Evacuations

Section 103 of the Omnibus Diplomatic Security and Antiterrorism Act of 1986 (P.L. 99-399; 22 U.S.C. §4802) requires DOS to “develop and implement policies and programs to provide for the safe and efficient evacuation of...private United States citizens when their lives are endangered.” In addition, Section 4 of the BAA (22 U.S.C. §2671) authorizes expenditures for the evacuation of “private United States citizens or third-country nationals, on a reimbursable basis to the maximum extent practicable.” Private U.S. citizens thus generally have been responsible

for a portion of the cost for their evacuation. The BAA limits the scope of repayment to “a reasonable commercial air fare immediately prior to the events giving rise to the evacuation.”

In practice, when DOS has recommended that private U.S. citizens leave a country, it has advised them to evacuate using existing commercial transportation options whenever possible. This policy was reflected in a Security Alert the U.S. Embassy in Beirut, Lebanon, issued on February 28, which said that “[DOS] urges U.S. citizens to depart Lebanon now while commercial options remain available” and later in a region-wide security update issued March 2. When commercial travel options have not been available, DOS in some cases has arranged charter flights or facilitated other travel options.

Some Members of Congress and other observers have expressed concern that DOS failed to promptly offer sufficient travel assistance to U.S. citizens after U.S. and Israeli military operations against Iran began, noting that immediate airport closures and flight cancellations quickly constrained the availability of commercial travel options. On March 3, DOS announced that it was facilitating charter flights from the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, and Jordan for U.S. citizens. DOS also said that commercial aviation options remained available in the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Egypt, adding that it was helping U.S. citizens book commercial flights to depart those countries. For U.S. citizens in countries such as Israel that lacked commercial aviation availability, DOS indicated that it was facilitating other forms of travel, including ground transportation. On March 6, DOS said that a 24/7 Task Force it established to provide consular services in the region had helped over 13,000 Americans, including through offering security guidance and travel assistance.

Funding

DOS’s Bureau of Consular Affairs (CA), which administers the CIP and facilitates overseas evacuations, is funded through the Consular and Border Security Programs (CBSP) account. Congress has not funded this account through annual appropriations. Instead, Congress has authorized CA to collect and deposit consular fees (fees charged for consular services, including the adjudication of U.S. passport and visa applications) into CBSP, which CA has expended for consular services and other programs.

Congress separately has funded DOS’s overseas evacuation flights through the Emergencies in the Diplomatic and Consular Service (EDCS) account, also known as the “K Fund.” DOS has been able to further fund emergency evacuations using transfer authorities provided by Congress. For example, Congress in recent DOS appropriations laws authorized DOS to transfer and merge funds appropriated to the Diplomatic Programs; Embassy Security, Construction, and Maintenance; and EDCS accounts for evacuations.

Issues Facing Congress

As Congress continues to conduct oversight of DOS’s provision of consular assistance to U.S. citizens in the Middle East, it may consider the following issues.

Statutory Reimbursement Requirement. DOS has said that it intends to “waive any statutory requirement for American citizens to reimburse the government for travel expenses” related to their evacuation from the Middle East. Section 4 of the BAA, which prescribes the requirement that private U.S. citizens reimburse DOS for evacuation assistance, does not include explicit waiver authority. However, it does provide that U.S. citizens reimburse DOS only “to the maximum extent practicable.” Congress could consider legislation to amend or strike the BAA reimbursement requirement or similar provisions, or leave such provisions unchanged. H.R. 270, introduced in January 2025, would authorize the Secretary of State, when providing repatriation loans to U.S. citizens, “to waive costs of activities relating to [their] evacuation when their lives are endangered by war or acts of terrorism” (this measure does not directly address the crisis evacuation loans DOS often provides under such circumstances). A bill introduced in the 117th Congress (H.R. 8807) sought to strike the reimbursement requirement altogether. Other bills introduced in past Congresses aimed to waive the reimbursement requirement for specific contingencies. For example, H.R. 5102 and H.R. 6754 (both introduced in the 117th Congress) sought to waive the reimbursement requirement for prescribed periods with respect to evacuations from Afghanistan and Ukraine, respectively.

Evacuation Planning and Funding Availability. As of March 6, DOS estimated that “nearly 24,000” American citizens (not all of whom required evacuation assistance from DOS) had safely returned to the United States from the Middle East since February 28. However, one press report estimated that up to 1 million U.S. citizens may reside in the region. If conflict in the Middle East continues, Congress may confer with DOS regarding the details of its planning and funding availability to facilitate large numbers of evacuations. Congress may also consider whether or not to increase funding for the EDCS account, including in a potential future supplemental appropriations measure, or provide additional transfer authorities to DOS.

Timeliness and Extent of Consular Support. Some Members of Congress and other observers have noted concerns about the timeliness and extent of DOS consular support to U.S. citizens in the Middle East. Members may seek to engage with DOS and/or conduct outreach to constituents who experienced difficulties evacuating from the Middle East to gather details to inform oversight efforts and legislation. Such legislation could seek to change elements of the process through which DOS provides consular assistance during overseas crises. For example, future legislation could stipulate triggers, potentially including a DOS-ordered departure of embassy staff from a country, that would require DOS to subsequently issue guidance urging U.S. citizens to depart the country and/or offer evacuation assistance.

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IFI1548

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