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## The Middle East, North Africa, and Afghanistan: Selected Issues for the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress

U.S. interests and policy in an evolving Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region are changing, as U.S. national security strategy prioritizes competition with China and Russia and as the United States has withdrawn some military forces from long-standing regional conflicts. The 118<sup>th</sup> Congress may review U.S. approaches to the MENA region as Members consider proposals to fund and authorize U.S. programs and exercise oversight of foreign policy, defense, intelligence, and assistance initiatives.

The United States has devoted significant resources, including the deployment of military forces, to combat terrorist threats and stabilize parts of the MENA region since 2001. The Biden Administration has said it seeks to build a cooperative network of MENA partner countries and enable them to meet shared challenges. According to the 2022 National Security Strategy, the Administration intends to bolster the resilience and capabilities of MENA partners and believes that a “more integrated Middle East that empowers our allies and partners will advance regional peace and prosperity, while reducing the resource demands the region makes on the United States over the long term.” The Administration also has stated, “the United States will not allow foreign or regional powers to jeopardize freedom of navigation through the Middle East’s waterways, including the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab al Mandab, nor tolerate efforts by any country to dominate another – or the region – through military buildups, incursions, or threats.”

The 118<sup>th</sup> Congress will likely face both long-standing and emergent issues in the MENA region. These include the multilateral impasse with the Islamic Republic of Iran (Iran) over its nuclear program; concern over Iran’s support for armed groups across the MENA region; unrest in Iran; leadership transitions in Israel and perhaps among Palestinian groups; and the potential for renewed Taliban rule in Afghanistan to allow global terrorists to reconstitute their capabilities.

Conflict, tension, and crises in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Lebanon pose enduring risks to the region’s stability and generate demands on U.S. foreign aid, diplomacy, and military resources. Tunisia, the one “Arab Spring” country that established a multiparty democracy, is becoming increasingly authoritarian amid an economic crisis. Egypt also faces economic pressure and has sought support from Arab Gulf states. Across the region, economic recovery and growth prospects are uneven, affecting MENA countries’ ability to grapple with challenges posed by climate change, demographic pressures, and new technologies.

### Iran

Since the 1979 establishment of the Islamic Republic, successive U.S. Administrations and Congresses have

identified Iran as a multifaceted threat to the United States. Iran seeks to erode U.S. influence in the Middle East while projecting power in neighboring states through a variety of means, including the development of advanced missile and unmanned aerial vehicle capabilities; support for a number of partner governments and armed groups; closer ties with Russia and China; and an advancing nuclear program.

In response, Congress has authorized sanctions and required legislative review of agreements over Iran’s nuclear program. The 2015 nuclear deal (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA) imposed limits on Iran’s nuclear program in exchange for relief from most U.S. and international sanctions. The Trump Administration withdrew the United States from the accord in 2018. The Biden Administration sought to revive the accord, but those indirect talks stalled. Some Members have called on the Biden Administration to formally terminate JCPOA negotiations. The Biden Administration reportedly is resistant to ending those negotiations, but U.S. officials have emphasized they are not actively pursuing them.

**Figure 1. Middle East, North Africa, and Afghanistan**



**Source:** CRS, using State Department and ESRI data.

The September 2022 death of a young woman named Mahsa Amini sparked protests that have challenged the Iranian government’s authority. In response, the Biden Administration has expressed public support for the protesters; sanctioned dozens of individuals and entities involved in the violent crackdown against the demonstrators; and sought to facilitate Iranians’ internet access. Members of Congress are likely to oversee and seek to shape U.S. policy responses to the protests.

U.S. policymakers also have expressed concern about Iran’s provision of weaponry to Russia for use in Ukraine.

### Israel and the Palestinians

Israel’s security and its efforts to peacefully resolve disputes with the Palestinians have been decades-long U.S. policy priorities. Congress has required the executive branch to certify that arms sales to MENA countries will

not adversely affect Israel's "qualitative military edge" over neighboring militaries. Since FY2019, Congress annually has appropriated \$3.3 billion in Foreign Military Financing and an additional \$500 million for U.S.-Israel missile defense programs. Some Members of Congress have sought to augment or expedite aid or arms sales in response to expressed Israeli needs.

In many respects, U.S.-Israel cooperation has steadily grown. For example, U.S. officials have helped Israel build upon diplomatic advances such as the 2020-2021 Abraham Accords (involving the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco) by encouraging Arab states and other countries to cooperate strategically, economically, and culturally with Israel on matters of mutual interest. Israel's 2021 integration into U.S. Central Command's area of responsibility has bolstered opportunities for the U.S. military to work with Israel and some Arab states on air defense coordination to counter Iran, though obstacles remain to more formal alignment and intelligence sharing.

However, Israeli authorities' control over Palestinian life in East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip complicate Israel's relations with the United States. The Biden Administration supports a negotiated two-state solution, but is not actively pursuing talks. In efforts to keep diplomatic options open and help de-escalate ongoing violence and unrest, the Administration has criticized steps taken by both Israelis (settlement expansion, settler violence, Palestinian home demolitions and evictions) and Palestinians (incitement to violence and payments for individuals imprisoned for acts of terrorism). After a lull in aid for the Palestinians during the Trump Administration, Congress and the Biden Administration resumed some economic, humanitarian, and security assistance. In light of continued Israeli-Palestinian tensions, some Members of Congress seek to add limits, conditions, or other oversight measures to aid for either or both sides.

U.S. concerns about leadership in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza could affect deliberations in the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress. In December 2022, Benjamin Netanyahu formed a government featuring ultra-nationalist coalition partners who appear poised to play a direct role in managing sensitive Israeli-Palestinian interactions at Jerusalem holy sites and elsewhere. Restive Palestinian groups in the West Bank appear to be vying for control partly in anticipation of the potential departure of 87-year-old Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. The Sunni Islamist group Hamas (a U.S.-designated terrorist organization) maintains de facto rule in Gaza and occasionally appears to use violence in contentious Israeli-Palestinian situations to boost its domestic popularity.

### Afghanistan

The aftershocks of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban return to power continue to reverberate. Members of Congress have monitored the Taliban's renewed rule, the status of the Islamic State, and Al Qaeda, and U.S. efforts to counter these groups from "over the horizon." The 2022 National Defense Strategy states these groups "have had their capabilities degraded, but some may be able to reconstitute them in short order."

The status of tens of thousands of Afghans who had worked for the United States, and ongoing U.S. efforts to secure

their relocation, remains a concern. Many are still in Afghanistan but seek to leave; others are in third countries pending processing for entry to the United States.

Taliban actions led to dramatic reversals in the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan, a longtime bipartisan policy concern. The Taliban have prohibited girls and women from attending secondary schools and universities and curtailed women's roles, including with many nongovernmental organizations.

Since 2021, Afghanistan, already one of the world's poorest countries, has faced intersecting humanitarian and economic crises. The cut-off of international development assistance, U.S. sanctions on the Taliban, and the U.S. hold on Afghan central bank assets have contributed to these challenges. The Biden Administration and many in Congress seek to ameliorate these crises, but without taking any action that boosts the Taliban's position or that may be perceived as doing so. Pursuing these policies in tandem may prove complicated given the Taliban's apparent willingness to resist international pressure at the cost of considerable humanitarian and economic suffering.

Congressional oversight of U.S. Afghanistan policy could feature reporting requirements, additional hearings, and ongoing and new investigations. Future reports from the congressionally-created Afghanistan War Commission and other bodies may offer lessons for legislators.

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"The future of the Middle East will be defined as much by climate, technological, and demographic changes as by traditional security matters."

- U.S. National Security Strategy, October 2022

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### Instability and Change in the MENA Region

Unrest, conflict, and change have swept the MENA region over the last two decades, mirroring some countries in stalemate and suffering but opening new possibilities for others. Shared challenges also are emerging. The 2022 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Egypt highlighted the MENA region as among the world's most water-stressed and vulnerable to climate change impacts. Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine has shaken global energy and food markets and is demonstrating how events beyond the region may impose costs and consequences on MENA societies. Some U.S. partners, such as the assertive leaders of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, seek global influence and at times challenge U.S. preferences, including through closer ties with Russia and China.

As the United States adjusts its regional presence and priorities and seeks cooperation from MENA partners, Congress may reexamine patterns of U.S. engagement and assistance and evaluate the effectiveness of the executive branch's approaches to advancing varied U.S. interests.

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