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Middle East: Key Issues for the 117th Congress

The Middle East in 2021 faces continued political instability, civil wars, terrorist threats, economic crises, the proliferation of unconventional weapons, external military intervention, and the ongoing spread of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). It remains to be seen whether the territorial defeat of the Islamic State (IS) organization and the recent diplomatic normalization agreements brokered by the Trump Administration between Israel and several Arab states augur improved regional stability. U.S. stated policy goals have remained broadly consistent across Administrations: deter interstate conflict, counter terrorism, ensure the global flow of energy resources, and preserve U.S. influence in the face of rival power competition.

The 116th Congress shaped U.S. policy in the Middle East through various legislative tools. Congress appropriated funds for issues Members deemed a priority—such as stabilization efforts in Syria. Some Members sought to place conditions on U.S. foreign aid and/or block arms sales to express concern with particular developments—such as Saudi use of U.S. military equipment to target civilians in Yemen. The 116th Congress maintained and expanded sanctions—such as those in place against Iran—in an effort to change state behavior. Congress also continued to shape the U.S. military footprint in the region through its annual defense authorization and appropriation measures.

Conflicts and Humanitarian Crises

Violent civil conflict in several Middle East states have posed a threat to U.S. national security interests and created massive humanitarian needs and population displacements.

Yemen. The region's most impoverished state, Yemen faces an ongoing insurgency by an Iran-backed movement known as the Houthis, which controls most of northern Yemen and the capital San'a—from which it has launched attacks against Saudi Arabia. A Saudi-led military campaign against the Houthis—which relies in part on a blockade of the country's major port—has constrained the provision of food and medical supplies to civilians, and, along with Houthi actions, helped create what U.N. officials describe as the world's worst humanitarian crisis. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, which has attempted to direct attacks in the United States, operates in parts of southeastern Yemen, while Iranian maritime operations off the Yemeni coast near the Bab al Mandab strait have threatened vital international shipping lanes.

Libya. Since an armed uprising ended the 42-year rule of Muammar al Qadhafi in 2011, interim authorities have proved unable to form a stable government and local armed groups have competed for influence and resources. The United States is supporting U.N.-led efforts to sustain a ceasefire agreement reached in October 2020 between the U.S.-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) and supporters of the Libyan National Army (LNA)

movement, which sought to seize the capital in 2019. Russian military contractors have intervened in Libya on behalf of the LNA, while Turkey provides overt military support to the GNA. Both sides have recruited and deployed Syrian militias. A U.N.-led political process envisions national elections in December 2021, and U.N. observers may deploy to monitor the ceasefire. Counterterrorism has remained a top U.S. priority in Libya, and periodic U.S. airstrikes have targeted suspected Islamic State and Al Qaeda fighters there.

Syria. Analysts estimate that the Syria conflict, which began in 2011, has killed up to 593,000 people as of late 2020 and displaced half of Syria's pre-war population. As of 2021, five countries operate in or maintain military forces in Syria: Russia, Turkey, Iran, Israel, and the United States. U.S. goals in Syria have included reaching a political settlement to the conflict, ensuring the enduring defeat of the Islamic State, and securing the withdrawal of all Iranian-commanded forces. Ongoing challenges for policymakers include countering extremist groups linked to Al Qaeda, responding to the threat posed by IS remnants and detainees, facilitating humanitarian aid to 6.6 million internally displaced persons and 5.5 million refugees, reducing clashes between Turkish-supported opposition forces and U.S.-backed Kurdish allies, managing Russian and Iranian challenges to U.S. military operations, and implementing sanctions on the Syrian government while minimizing the impact of those measures on civilians.

Lebanon. Counterterrorism remains a key U.S. priority in Lebanon, where Hezbollah—with Iranian support—operates freely as a militia force as well as a political party. U.S. policy has focused on countering Iran and Hezbollah by strengthening the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), an approach questioned by some Members who judge that the LAF is vulnerable to Hezbollah influence. The U.N. Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) continues to patrol Lebanon's informal border with Israel and to monitor compliance with U.N. resolutions calling for the area to remain free of armed personnel; the United States has called on UNIFIL to more aggressively investigate and counter Hezbollah activities along the border. However, Lebanon may prioritize social and economic issues over concerns with Hezbollah: as of 2021 the country hosts more refugees per capita than any other country in the world; it also faces simultaneous debt, fiscal, banking, and currency crises that have doubled poverty rates over the past year.

Containing Iran

Countering Iran's nuclear ambitions has been a consistent U.S. goal in the region, although recent Administrations have pursued it in different ways. In 2018, asserting that the 2015 multilateral Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA or Iran nuclear deal) did not address the broad range of Iran's objectionable behavior and that the

agreement's limitations did not justify sanctions relief, the Trump Administration announced that the United States would "exit" the JCPOA and instead apply "maximum pressure" on Iran's economy. The United States reactivated as of November 2018 all U.S. sanctions suspended to implement the JCPOA, and also has imposed new, additional sanctions on Iran. Iran has since taken steps exceeding JCPOA-mandated restrictions, including its January 2021 increase in uranium enrichment.

Additionally, Iran and its regional proxy militia forces maintain and arguably have expanded their influence in the region, where they have increasingly come into direct conflict with U.S. forces and allies. Iran has bolstered the Assad government in Syria, and is among the primary sources of funding for Lebanese Hezbollah—which continues to develop its missile stockpile and engage in occasional clashes with Israel. Iran has also provided support to the Houthi movement in Yemen, as well as to militias operating in Iraq. Iran's external operations are carried out by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force (IRGC-QF). In 2020, U.S. forces killed IRGC-QF leader Qasem Soleimani.

Israel and the Palestinians

Israel is a close U.S. partner, but presents challenges to U.S. policy on some issues. Through aid, arms sales, and other means, U.S. officials consistently support Israel's qualitative military edge (QME) while seeking to prevent large-scale regional conflict. Israeli military or covert operations to counter Iran-related threats, including from Syria and Lebanese Hezbollah, could affect U.S. objectives. The Trump Administration largely favored Israeli positions vis-à-vis the Palestinians, including by recognizing Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem and the Golan Heights, and cutting aid for the Palestinians. In 2020, the Administration pivoted away from potential support for Israeli annexation in the West Bank to help Israel begin normalizing relations with some Arab states—the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco—due in part to broadly shared concerns over Iran. The incoming Biden Administration appears inclined to support further Arab-Israeli normalization, including possibly with Saudi Arabia, but may review related arms sales. U.S. officials may seek to repair U.S.-Palestinian ties—including some restoration of aid—and reverse some Trump-era moves toward legitimizing Israeli West Bank settlements.

Regional Allies Present Challenges

Saudi Arabia. Robust counterterrorism cooperation with Saudi Arabia has not fully offset U.S. concerns regarding the country's military operations and human rights record. Since 2015, a coalition led by Saudi Arabia has conducted a military campaign against Houthi forces in Yemen that seized power from Yemen's recognized government. Non-governmental observers estimate that operations by the Saudi-led coalition have resulted in the deaths of thousands of Yemeni civilians, and Saudi and Emirati operations in Yemen remain controversial in Congress due to their use of U.S. military equipment. Some Members also have expressed concern about human rights issues including: the 2018 killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi by Saudi government officials, and the imprisonment of reform advocates, women activists, and others. Some Members

also have expressed concern about Saudi Arabia's apparent intention to seek to develop a uranium enrichment capacity as part of its nascent nuclear energy program.

Turkey. Problems with Turkey, a NATO ally, have intensified over Syria and other regional issues, and are complicated by the country's increased authoritarianism and economic fragility. Turkey's 2019 acquisition of Russian S-400 surface-to-air defense systems led the Trump Administration to remove Turkey from the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program and impose sanctions under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA). Turkey may face a choice to reduce the impact of sanctions by forgoing use of the S-400, or turn to alternative defense suppliers—including possibly Russia for next-generation fighter aircraft. Existing law precludes the transfer of F-35s to Turkey while it possesses the S-400, and some informal congressional holds apply to U.S.-Turkey arms sales.

Egypt. Several issues have caused tension in U.S.-Egypt relations in recent years, including Egypt's continued detention of American citizens and the Egyptian military's possible purchase of Russian Sukhoi Su-35 fighter aircraft, a move that could trigger U.S. sanctions under CAATSA.

Shifts in U.S. Military Posture

In 2021, U.S. military forces appear to be in the process of winding down long-term military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, but significant U.S. military forces remain in the Middle East to protect partners, deter Iran, and pursue terrorist threats. U.S. military forces operate from host nation military bases across the region, including those in Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, UAE, Jordan, and Turkey.

Afghanistan. U.S. forces were deployed to Afghanistan following the attacks of September 11, 2001, and have since conducted counterterrorism operations and provided training and support to Afghan forces against the Taliban. As part of a February 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement, the United States agreed to withdraw U.S. and international forces from Afghanistan by late April 2021. In turn, the Taliban agreed to prevent groups such as Al Qaeda from using Afghan soil to threaten the United States or its allies. The Afghan government and the Taliban formally began talks in September 2020, but it is unclear whether these will ultimately lead to a settlement to end the war. It is also unclear what, if any, role the United States will play in future nation-building efforts. Some analysts have warned that a U.S. withdrawal could lead to the collapse of the Afghan government, or to the reestablishment of Taliban control over parts or all of the country.

Iraq. Amid attacks on U.S. facilities and personnel in Iraq by Iran-backed militias, U.S. officials in 2020 announced that the United States would reduce its military presence in Iraq based on an assessment that Iraqi security forces are capable of independent operations against IS remnants. U.S. forces returned to Iraq in 2014 following a previous withdrawal in 2011, to assist Iraqi forces in combatting the Islamic State. Iran-backed militias and politicians call for U.S. withdrawal and exercise significant political influence in Iraq, which plans to hold national elections in June 2021.

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