

**FISCAL YEAR 2024 BUDGET REQUEST FOR
THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA**

HEARING

BEFORE THE

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON NEAR EAST,
SOUTH ASIA, CENTRAL ASIA,
AND COUNTERTERRORISM**

OF THE

**COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS
UNITED STATES SENATE**

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C O N T E N T S

	Page
Murphy, Hon. Christopher, U.S. Senator From Connecticut	1
Young, Hon. Todd, U.S. Senator From Indiana	3
Leaf, Hon. Barbara, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, U.S. Department of State, Washington, DC	4
Prepared Statement	6
Pryor, Jeanne, Deputy Assistant Administrator of the Bureau for the Middle East, United States Agency for International Development, Washington, DC	11
Prepared Statement	12

ADDITIONAL MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

Responses of Ambassador Barbara Leaf to Questions Submitted by Senator Jeanne Shaheen	32
Responses of Ambassador Barbara Leaf to Questions Submitted by Senator Chris Van Hollen	32

FISCAL YEAR 2024 BUDGET REQUEST FOR THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

WEDNESDAY, MAY 31, 2023

U.S. SENATE,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NEAR EAST, SOUTH ASIA,
CENTRAL ASIA, AND COUNTERTERRORISM,
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS,
Washington, DC.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:00 a.m., in room SD-419, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Christopher Murphy presiding.

Present: Senators Murphy [presiding], Cardin, Shaheen, Kaine, Young, and Cruz.

Also Present: Senator Van Hollen.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. CHRISTOPHER MURPHY, U.S. SENATOR FROM CONNECTICUT

Senator MURPHY. Good morning to our witnesses, colleagues, and guests who are convening the subcommittee today to discuss the FY24 budget request for the Middle East and North Africa.

We do this on a week in which we may be getting a little bit more clarity into what our budget levels will be for the coming year and we are looking forward as the authorizing committee working hand-in-hand with the Appropriations Committee as we set budget numbers and investment levels for the Middle East and North Africa.

This is, of course, a region where the bulk of our assistance dollars go. Since 1946, the Middle East and North Africa has received \$372 billion of U.S. assistance. That is equivalent to the regions of Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America combined.

It is worth asking if this investment—this pretty massive investment has achieved its strategic objectives and if not, why not.

Here is a more pointed question. Seventy percent of the aid for this region is security assistance. What has been the return on that investment?

For instance, do we have more reliable security partners today? Do we have more democracy in the region? Do we have less conflict?

I do not know that any of the answers to those questions is a definitive “yes.” It is possible that the primary outcome of much of this assistance has been to simply enable dictatorships that use the military more often for domestic repression than countering external threats.

Now, I am sure our witnesses will paint a slightly rosier picture and there certainly are success stories, but one of the defenses of this investment often is that it is necessary to make sure that the energy product produced in the region continues to move to the United States, especially when we really need it in times of global crisis.

Last summer when the United States asked our partners in the Middle East to help ease the global energy price crisis caused by Russia's war in Ukraine, for the most part our partners, the ones who were the recipients of these billions of dollars in foreign aid, turned their backs on us. We should talk about that today, too.

In addition to these big picture questions, it is worth drilling down into many of these countries that really matter and asking if our assistance levels make sense in 2024 the way it did when these relationships began many years ago.

Does it make sense for Congress to automatically renew again basically the same exact amount of military aid to Egypt the way we have done every single year since 1987, or do 60,000 political prisoners and little evidence of political reform argue for us to take a fresh look?

Does it make sense for us to renew the same level of aid to Tunisia's military this year compared to last year when that institution is regularly participating in military trials against the President's political opponents?

As we continue to put billions of dollars into supporting the Iraqi military since ISIS took over broad swaths of the country in 2014, are we confident that that institution can stand up and defend their country today in ways that it could not do, obviously, 10 years ago today?

As I mentioned, let us be clear, there are targeted meaningful success stories where our aid has delivered outcomes that are good for us and good for our partners in the region.

Just a couple quick examples—Lebanon, where our support for the Lebanese Armed Forces has been crucial in keeping Hezbollah at bay, keeping protesters protected as the country's economic and political crises deepen.

Once a small, constantly threatened country whose very existence was always in peril, today Israel now boasts a strong military capable of defending itself from external attack.

In places like Yemen and Syria, humanitarian assistance just undoubtedly has saved tens of thousands of lives over the last decade.

This hearing and a broader commitment that I think the full committee has to have to reviewing policy in this region, it is really important because I would argue that too much of our assistance today has locked in decades-old assumptions about the region while the sand is shifting under our feet and the region is changing rapidly.

We convene the subcommittee today to have this conversation. We look forward to working with our colleagues on the Appropriations Committee in the coming weeks to draft the State and Foreign Operations portion of the FY24 Appropriations Act and, hopefully, the answers we will get to questions today will help in that effort.

With that, I will turn to the ranking member for his opening remarks.

**STATEMENT OF HON. TODD YOUNG,
U.S. SENATOR FROM INDIANA**

Senator YOUNG. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for convening this hearing today to review the State Department's budget request for the Middle East and North Africa.

As we consider what the Department and USAID has requested, we must also consider the policies and realities that undergird the budget request.

Seven out of \$10 that the Department requests for the MENA region are directed toward foreign military financing. Millions of dollars more in programs managed by the Department of Defense flow towards counterterrorism and train, advise, and equip missions.

Finally, tens of billions of defense articles are sold to partner and allied governments every year in the region. This has been the trend not because security relationships are easier nor is this the case because the United States is not willing or able to purposefully perform economic, humanitarian, and development programs across the MENA region.

Quite the contrary, in fact. The United States focus on security assistance has been and will likely continue to be the trend because this is a region of the world where hard power decisions still carry the most weight.

Security for their people, economies, and interests is still the primary concern of every single partner and ally the United States has in the region. With security first on everyone's mind, we must confront the government most in favor of undermining or destroying what fragile stability exists: Iran.

I continue to be concerned by the Biden administration's position or sometimes lack thereof on stopping Iran since it has become clear Iran could not be stopped at the negotiating table, a realization that took far too long.

Iran has not stood still even while we have. It has deepened its conventional military ties with Russia and China, improving its own conventional military capabilities and industrial base while fueling Putin's invasion of Ukraine.

It has supported China's economy with discounted oil, sales the Administration has repeatedly turned a blind eye towards. Its proxies in Gaza just launched more than a thousand rockets at Israel, including towards Jerusalem, and just last week had tested yet another ballistic missile capable of reaching Israel and beyond.

In the face of these advances, I have yet to hear the Administration articulate a clear policy towards the regime in Tehran that utilizes every tool in our unilateral and multilateral toolbox.

This is not an Iran hearing, but these concerns and our discussion today is educated by the lack of answers the Senate received 2 weeks ago and because Iran's attempts to upset regional security manifest themselves in many of the decisions we make about policy and budgetary priorities.

In an era of strategic competition, dollars, force posture and prioritization of strategic assets are not fungible. The threat from

Iran draws our focus and resourcing away from Europe and especially East Asia, the priority theater for the United States.

Likewise, within the region, if our counterterrorism focus is directed towards Iran and its proxies then we are required to pull our attention from groups like al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, in Yemen, or ISIS.

In our hearing today I hope to hear from our witnesses about how they first and foremost are positioning the Department and USAID to tackle the question of security in the region.

The decades-long quest—the contest with China remains our nation’s highest geostrategic priority even as our focus is drawn towards Europe in response to Putin’s war in Ukraine.

We still have a persistent interest in the stability, security, and over time the progress of democracy and accountability in the Middle East and North Africa. The American people and our economic and national security are impacted by developments in the Middle East.

It is both a space for competition with strategic rivals in Russia and China, but also a region where adversaries, allies, and partners are vying for influence, prosperity, and security.

Both of these parallel tracks will be disturbed if we permit the further erosion of regional stability and erosion driven by our lack of firm resolve and action in the face of increasingly complex threats.

With that, I once again thank our witnesses for their appearance today. I look forward to our discussion. Chairman.

Senator MURPHY. Thank you, Senator Young.

Let me introduce our witnesses and ask you to present us with testimony. Keep it to 5 minutes, if you could, and we will submit any additional remarks for the record.

Neither of you really need an introduction, but we are joined today first by the Honorable Barbara Leaf, who is the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs at the U.S. Department of State, and Ms. Jeanne Pryor, the Deputy Assistant Administrator for the Bureau of the Middle East at USAID.

Welcome to you both. I will hand the floor to you, Ambassador Leaf.

STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE BARBARA LEAF, ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NEAR EASTERN AFFAIRS, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, WASHINGTON, DC

Ambassador LEAF. Thank you, Chairman Murphy and Ranking Member Young, members of the subcommittee. Thank you for inviting me to testify here today on the President’s \$7.57 billion fiscal year 2024 budget request and our priorities in the Middle East and North Africa.

The region remains, as both of you have noted, of vital importance to U.S. interests. President Biden has articulated a forward-looking approach to the region based on five elements: Partnership, deterrence, diplomacy, regional integration, and values.

We have made some significant progress. We launched the Negev Forum and I2U2 on the back of the historic Abraham Accords, helped deescalate Israeli-Palestinian tensions, advanced a U.N.-facilitated truce in Yemen, facilitated and negotiated an historic mar-

itime boundary agreement between Israel and Lebanon, and helped secure the largest ever purchase of Boeing planes in Saudi Arabia.

Our assiduous diplomacy has repaired rifts and we now benefit from a region that while still fragile can itself undertake the work with us of stabilization and repair.

We are as diplomatically engaged and committed to the region as we have ever been. Doing the hard work to demonstrate our vision for the region's peace and prosperity and stability can deliver a more compelling future. Your support for this request will cement U.S. success.

Our regional engagement begins with partnership. Building on our decades-long relationships and our track record of partnership focused on solving shared problems and building shared prosperity and security.

In an era of strategic competition, these partnerships are what set us apart. Our FY24 request supports partners like Israel, Jordan, Egypt, as well as Iraq, and creates the conditions that sustain our cooperation.

Deterrence—our unrivaled network of relationships and partnerships creates integrated deterrence to counter malign actors including Iran. The President has been clear that he is committed to ensuring that Iran never acquires a nuclear weapon.

Diplomacy is the best means to address the issue, coupled with deterring Iran's adventurism by building a deep coalition of partners with integrated defense capabilities and the willingness to hold Iran to account.

Support for our partners' security enhances deterrence. The President's FY24 request includes \$5.3 billion in foreign military financing as a result.

Our commitment to Israel's security is ironclad. Consistent with our MOU for Israel, the request includes \$3.3 billion to support Israel's security.

On diplomacy, to build sustainable regional security we must rely on diplomacy to build out coalitions that deescalate conflict and work collectively. The \$42.55 million request for Yemen as an example sustains our efforts that led to the key elements of the April 2022 truce, which continues to hold 14 months later.

We remain focused on the enduring defeat of ISIS. The \$97 million request for stabilization assistance in northeast Syria, particularly our effort on al-Hol, ensures ISIS cannot leverage instability in Syria or recruit vulnerable displaced populations to reconstitute and threaten the United States.

Together with our partners we helped secure a ceasefire in Libya, shifting the focus to political negotiation. Our \$16 million request supports Libya's eventual transition via national elections to a democratic, stable and, hopefully, unified state.

Regional integration—through this request we will continue to promote regional integration to unlock the region's potential for sustained and wide-ranging economic growth, which in itself will help provide greater stability and security.

The Negev Forum is one example, designing and delivering the tangible benefits of regional integration. Along with the GCC we have also developed a regional approach to Gulf security.

These fora and more would benefit from the MENA Opportunity Fund, a new \$90 million flexible funding mechanism we propose to take advantage of both progress or potential breakthroughs to advance regional peace and integration.

We are also cognizant that these efforts are no substitute for a negotiated settlement between Israelis and Palestinians. A two-state solution is the best way to ensure Israel's future as a Jewish democratic state living in peace alongside a viable, sovereign, democratic Palestinian state.

Our request includes \$309 million in economic and security assistance for the Palestinian people and support for people-to-people connections under the Middle East Partnership for Peace Act.

Finally, values. We will keep our values at the center of our approach. We do this because it is who we are as Americans and because this also serves our interests in the region.

We want the people of this region to know what we stand for and know that what we are offering is in the long run more likely to produce shared security, shared prosperity.

Our request reflects our commitment to respond to changes that impact our values. The request prioritizes support for the Tunisian people to address both economic stability and democratic openings should they emerge. Through the Middle East Partnership Initiative—MEPI—regional programs empower women in the workforce and embrace or enhance economic growth.

Our policy today is designed to build the sustainable integrated partnerships necessary to develop shared solutions to these challenges so that we can build a better future that we and our partners and, indeed, the people of this region seek.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify here and for your continued support for our efforts in the region, and I look forward to answering your questions.

[The prepared statement of Ambassador Leaf follows:]

Prepared Statement of Ambassador Barbara Leaf

Chairman Murphy, Ranking Member Young, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to appear before you today to testify on the President's FY 2024 Budget Request and how it supports our priorities in the Middle East and North Africa. I welcome the opportunity to testify with my USAID colleague Jeanne Pryor, Deputy Assistant Administrator for the Middle East Bureau. To advance the President's regional agenda, the FY 2024 President's Budget Request includes \$7.57 billion in foreign assistance for the Middle East and North Africa with the goal of continuing the work to build a more stable, integrated, and prosperous region.

President Biden has articulated a forward-looking approach to the region based on five elements: Partnership, Deterrence, Diplomacy, Regional Integration, and Values. Through this framework, we have made real progress de-escalating tensions and building a more stable, secure, and prosperous region. Our Budget Request allows us to carry this work forward, shoring up our successes and bolstering our efforts to address the challenges that remain.

Our approach to the region is anchored in two realities that shape our request and our commitment.

The first reality is that First, the Middle East and North Africa is vital to U.S. interests. The region is replete with strategic natural resources, is home to critical transit points in global shipping and trade, and our regional partners remain essential to our ability to achieve our broader foreign policy priorities. The region is also a vital theater for strategic competition with Russia and the PRC, and it is ever more important to demonstrate that we are committed to remaining deeply engaged. As the President has said, "we are not going to leave a vacuum in the Middle East for Russia or China to fill." While Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine poses an immediate threat to international stability, as the Secretary has emphasized, "China

represents the most consequential geopolitical challenge we face today: a country with the intent and, increasingly, the capability to challenge our vision for a free, open, secure, and prosperous international order.”

Which brings us to our second reality—our assiduous diplomacy has repaired regional rifts, and we now benefit from a region that, while still fragile, can itself undertake the work of stabilization and repair. Today, we are as diplomatically engaged and committed to the region as we’ve ever been, doing the hard work to demonstrate why our vision for the region’s peace and prosperity can deliver a more compelling future for our partners. Your support for this request will undergird the vigorous diplomatic engagement that drives current and future efforts to cement U.S. success across the region.

And we’ve had important successes over the past year. Our sustained efforts through the D–ISIS coalition and working with partners has eliminated key ISIS leaders and diminished ISIS’s capacity to a level where it is not currently able to pose a significant threat to the United States, our allies, our partners, and our interests. In Yemen, we propelled a UN-facilitated truce that has resulted in the longest period of calm—well over a year—since the conflict began more than 9 years ago. Our sustained engagement with Saudi Arabia, Oman, the UAE, and other regional partners has supported the work to bring the war in Yemen to a close. We facilitated a historic agreement between Israel and Lebanon to establish a permanent maritime boundary opening the door for greater peace and stability in the Eastern Mediterranean. We’ve launched the Negev Forum and I2U2, building on the historic Abraham Accords and normalization agreements, to deliver tangible benefits from regional integration. Our participation in the Aqaba-Sharm process has helped our partners make important strides to deescalate Israeli-Palestinian tensions. I recently returned from Iraq, where we conducted intensive, hands-on work to mediate tensions between Baghdad and Erbil, and between our Kurdish partners. Their ability to work productively together across a myriad of economic, security, energy and social issues will contribute to—or detract from—Iraq’s larger stability and security. In addition, our sustained engagement has resulted in steps toward Iraq’s energy reform and interconnection with the region. We’ve helped maintain international unity behind UN Special Representative Bathily to push Libya towards national elections. At COP in Egypt this past year and in Dubai later this year, we are building the global consensus to fight climate change. And we’ve helped secure major wins for U.S. companies, including a nearly \$37 billion agreement for the largest ever purchase of Boeing planes by Saudi Arabia earlier this year.

PARTNERSHIP

Our regional engagement begins with partnership. Building on our decades-long track record of commitment to the region, our partnerships focus on solving shared problems and building shared prosperity and security. We supported Israel, Jordan, and the UAE to launch Project Prosperity, opening the door to regional cooperation on clean energy and water security. We are working with Saudi Arabia to develop the next generation of 5G, 6G, and OpenRAN technology. We are helping Egypt to build 10 gigawatts of renewable power. And our partners have offered overwhelming support within the United Nations on key votes condemning Russia’s aggression against Ukraine and to elect strong U.S. leaders at the International Telecommunications Union and the International Organization for Migration. In an era of strategic competition, these partnerships are what set us apart.

And, last June, President Biden and other G7 leaders launched the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment, or PGII, to address enormous infrastructure needs in low- and middle-income countries and to meet the challenge of securing and diversifying global supply chains. Many of our Middle East partners, particularly in the Gulf, pledged multibillion-dollar investments to PGII. Those investments will advance strategic projects from ports, to rail, electricity lines, and essential minerals across Africa, to Asia, to the Middle East region.

As Secretary Blinken has said, we are not forcing countries to choose, but giving them a choice. Our partnership and our values—underwritten by your support for this request—can show why we remain a better choice.

The Request reaffirms our enduring commitment to partners like Israel, Jordan, Egypt, as well as Iraq, and create the conditions that sustain our cooperation. Most importantly, the FY 2024 request demonstrates our sustained engagement in and commitment to the region.

DETERRENCE

Working with our partners, we remain committed to ensuring that malign actors—in particular Iran and its proxies—are deterred from aggressive actions that undermine global security or threaten strategic lines of trade and communication. Our approach to regional security relies on leveraging our unrivaled network of partnerships creating integrated deterrence, through which, as Secretary Austin has emphasized, “multilateral efforts tackle shared threats, and operations are more integrated, and defense relationships grow deeper.”

Iran remains the pre-eminent regional threat as it continues to advance its nuclear program; support terrorist groups and destabilizing partners and proxies; support Russia in its war of aggression in Ukraine; and, as the world has seen, crack down on peaceful protests and forcefully suppress the rights of Iranians.

President Biden has been clear that he is committed to ensuring that Iran never acquires a nuclear weapon. Diplomacy is the best means to address that issue, but we are also deterring Iran’s adventurism by building a deep coalition of partners with integrated defense capabilities and the willingness to hold Iran to account.

The United States employs a wide range of tools to counter destabilizing Iranian activities across the region. We have hardened our defenses, conducted dynamic force deployments to the region, including long-range bomber overflights, deepened our intelligence cooperation, boosted the capacity of our partners, interdicted Iranian weapons and financial flows, and conducted defensive strikes to restore deterrence with Iran and its partners and proxies.

One of our most substantial tools to enhance deterrence remains our support for our partners through Foreign Military Financing (FMF). The FY 2024 President’s Budget Request for the region includes \$5.3 billion in FMF, maintaining our enduring commitments to Israel, Jordan, and Egypt, and supporting countries like Iraq, Lebanon, and Tunisia.

Our commitment to Israel’s security is ironclad. Consistent with our MOU with Israel, the request includes \$3.3 billion in FMF to support Israel’s security.

Our request of \$1.3 billion in FMF for Egypt supports our enduring security interests and partnership with Egypt to include maritime security, border security, and counterterrorism.

In Jordan, \$400 million in FMF will support F–16 aircraft procurement and modernization, sustain existing programs, and support other bilateral security priorities such as countering illicit drug trafficking.

Our request of \$75.5 million in FMF for Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) will assist Iraqi and Peshmerga security forces, ensuring the enduring defeat of ISIS and that Iraq is able to effectively exercise its own sovereignty independent of foreign influence. This ensures the U.S. remains Iraq’s security partner of choice in the face of Russian and Chinese competition.

In Lebanon, a spiraling economic and political crisis threatens to spill over into security threats to our closest partners in the region. The request includes \$150 million in FMF to continue U.S. support for the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), a vital national security institution which enjoys broad support across sectarian lines and is the only true defender of Lebanon and the Lebanese people.

DIPLOMACY

To build sustainable regional security, we must rely on diplomacy to build coalitions that de-escalate conflict and work collectively. We are making vital progress toward this end, and this request seeks funding for sustained support for our efforts.

The Biden administration has fully recommitted to the United Nations and its efforts in support of peace. We support UN-facilitated political and peace building processes in Yemen, Syria, and Libya.

Our efforts in Yemen helped lead to the April 2022 truce, of which the key elements continue to hold despite the formal end of the truce 7 months ago. While negotiations on reinstatement of a broader ceasefire agreement continue and the situation is fragile, the truce continues to provide Yemen with the longest period of calm since the war began in 2014, and this profound decrease in hostilities continues to bring tangible relief to Yemenis, including a significant reduction in civilian casualties. The requested \$42.55 million for Yemen will help sustain this effort, maintaining and expanding stabilization and development assistance objectives while continuing to support UN mechanisms.

In Syria, our steadfast opposition to normalization with the regime has not changed, nor will we lift any sanctions on the regime or those who aid it. We have also made it clear to our Arab partners, through repeated high-level diplomacy, that any engagement with the Assad regime must produce concrete actions that benefit the Syrian people. Our advocacy is shifting Arab partners’ agenda with Assad to-

ward key issues that matter to Syrians—providing unhindered humanitarian aid access through the cross-border mechanism authorized by the UN Security Council and pursuing a political resolution to the conflict as outlined in UN resolutions. Our investment in accountability efforts is also having real impact—just last year, documentation collected by our civil society partners was used in a German court to help support the first conviction of a Syrian regime official for war crimes.

We are focused on the enduring defeat of ISIS alongside our Coalition partners. In combination with our military efforts in partnership with Iraqi security forces and local forces in northeast Syria, and continued advocacy and support for repatriations of ISIS fighters and their family members from the northeast, continued stabilization support is essential to avoid an ISIS resurgence. The request of \$97 million for U.S.-funded stabilization assistance in northeast Syria would support critical community security efforts, revive economic activity and livelihoods, support youth rehabilitation, and restore essential services necessary for the reintegration of displaced Syrians to their home or host communities—including those returning from al-Hol, Roj, and other displacement camps. A key component of this request is funding to address the security concerns emanating from al-Hol, even as we work methodically to reduce the camp's population through returns of families to their home countries. This work—particularly our effort on al-Hol—is critical to ensure that ISIS cannot leverage instability in Syria or recruit vulnerable displaced populations to reconstitute and threaten the United States.

In Libya, our regional partnerships have played a central role in helping to secure a ceasefire that has now held for over 2 years and a political process that has shifted the focus from violent confrontation to political negotiation. Our request includes \$16 million to support Libya's eventual transition to a democratic, stable, and unified state, complemented by targeted resources from the Prevention and Stabilization Fund. This work is driven by our 10-year Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability in Libya and the Global Fragility Act. We are actively engaged now in a multilateral effort to support UN Special Representative Bathily's work to define a roadmap for national elections, with the goal of the Libyan people finally securing a unified government and enduring stability.

REGIONAL INTEGRATION

Through this request we will continue to promote regional integration to unlock the region's potential for sustained and wide-ranging economic growth. The World Bank has identified the MENA region as the least economically integrated region in the world, and this condition is reflected in the political and security realms. We have been proactive in building interconnections between our partners, from Iraq to Saudi Arabia to Jordan and Israel. Additionally, the ongoing effort to promote Israel's integration is at the center of our work, building on the Abraham Accords and normalization efforts more broadly between Israel and its neighbors.

Expanding upon the Abraham Accords, the Negev Forum brings the United States together with Bahrain, Egypt, Israel, Morocco, and the UAE to design and deliver the tangible benefits of regional integration. This past January, we launched the Forum's six working groups in a meeting hosted by our UAE partners that was the largest multilateral Arab Israeli gathering since the 1991 Madrid conference. The working groups are developing projects in Regional Security, Clean Energy, Food Security and Water Technology, Health, Tourism, and Education and Coexistence that the Forum will discuss at its next Ministerial later this summer. This request provides ongoing support for these regional initiatives, which can also catalyze investments by our partners.

We have deepened our cooperation with the GCC to develop a regional approach to Gulf security and, along with the United States Central Command, plant the seeds of a cooperative regional security architecture. International Military and Educational Training (IMET) funds for Bahrain and Oman will improve our interoperability and build capacity for greater regional partnerships.

We can build upon the progress of regional integration to develop globally transformative partnerships like the I2U2—connecting the United States, Israel, the UAE, and India—to work on innovative initiatives that address food security and climate change.

These fora and more would benefit from the MENA Opportunity Fund, a new \$90 million flexible funding mechanism that will allow us to take advantage of our progress or of potential breakthroughs to advance regional peace and integration. Given the velocity of change within the region, we envision this fund as ready seed money to address emerging opportunities or crises in countries such as Libya, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen, while also allowing the U.S. Government to seize on emerging

regional opportunities revealed through the work of Negev Forum and the Abraham Accords relationships themselves, in order to have maximum regional impact.

While we focus on deepening, and building upon, the Abraham Accords, we also are cognizant that these efforts are no substitute for a negotiated settlement between Israelis and Palestinians.

As Secretary Blinken has said, “we all must build on these relationships and growing normalization to make tangible improvements in the lives of Palestinians, and to make progress toward the longstanding goal of advancing a negotiated peace between Israelis and Palestinians. Palestinians and Israelis deserve equal measures of freedom, security, opportunity, and dignity.”

A two-state solution is the best way to ensure Israel’s future as a Jewish, democratic state, living in peace alongside a viable, sovereign, and democratic Palestinian state. Our request includes \$309 million in economic and security assistance for the Palestinian people in the West Bank and Gaza that will improve the lives of millions of Palestinians by addressing immediate needs on health, climate, water, and economic growth; promoting rule of law; enhancing civil society; and supporting people to people connections under the Middle East Partnership for Peace Act.

VALUES

And finally, we will keep our values at the center of our approach—support for human rights, respect for fundamental freedoms, the empowerment of women and girls, and protection for members of historically underrepresented communities. We will continue to encourage our partners to improve the rule of law, and we will do all that we can to bolster the strength and voices of civil society.

We do this because it is who we are as Americans, and because this also serves our interests. In an era of strategic competition, we must be steadfast in demonstrating the American value proposition. We want the people of the region to know what we stand for, see us stand up for these values, and know that what we’re offering is, in the long run, more promising, more responsive to the aspirations and longings of people everywhere, including in this fragile region, and more likely to produce the shared security and prosperity we all seek.

Our request reflects our commitment to respond to changes that impact our values. The Request reduces overall support for programs that benefit the Government of Tunisia to signal the United States’ continued concern over the consistent weakening of democratic institutions. At the same time, the request prioritizes support for the Tunisian people and civil society as they grapple with an economic crisis exacerbated by Russia’s war on Ukraine and strive for a democratic future for all. As part of our comprehensive approach to Tunisia, a portion of the funding within the MENA Opportunity Fund would also provide us with flexible resources to provide further support for the Tunisian people to address both economic stability and political openings should they emerge. It also ensures we can maintain the security cooperation critical to advancing regional security objectives and create the stability needed for a return to democratic governance.

The states that will be best equipped to meet the challenges of our changing world—whether a global pandemic or climate change—will be those with resilient, inclusive governments that treat civil society as a partner rather than a threat. It will be those who respect the human rights and fundamental freedoms of their people, such as freedom of expression, including for members of the press as well as political opponents and critics. And our request includes \$65 million for Near East Regional Democracy (NERD)—a \$10 million increase from last year—to continue and expand support in the areas of Internet freedom, including digital freedom, and human rights, using tools that are responsive to the dynamic environment on the ground to support the free flow of information to citizens.

Our diplomatic and assistance efforts empower women in the workforce and tap into the potential for economic growth to compete on a global level. The MENA region’s female labor participation is under 20 percent—the lowest rate globally—pales in comparison to a global average of 50 percent. Women are a hugely untapped resource in our region. Promoting gender equity, inclusion, and women’s participation in decision-making is part of our affirmative approach—recognizing that doing so is essential to addressing the region’s most pressing challenges. We need women’s full economic integration to effectively lead an inclusive recovery from the COVID pandemic, lead in resolving conflict, and innovation to tackle the climate crisis.

Through the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), regional programs play a critical role in changing perceptions and conditions in the public and private sector so that women can participate and lead in governance and the economy.

As Secretary Blinken said earlier this year, “closing the gender gap in the workforce by 2025 would add up to \$28 trillion to the global economy. Especially at a time when we are working to recover from COVID, deal with the impact of climate change, address the many conflicts that are also holding back the global economy—that contribution is more vital than ever.”

The region’s future and our future engagement with the region will be shaped by these shared global trends and challenges. Our policy today is designed to build the sustainable and integrated partnerships necessary to develop shared solutions to these challenges so we can build the better future that we and our partners seek.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the President’s FY 2024 budget request. I want to close by thanking this Subcommittee for your continued support for our efforts in the region. I look forward to answering your questions.

Senator MURPHY. Thank you.
Ms. Pryor.

STATEMENT OF JEANNE PRYOR, DEPUTY ASSISTANT ADMINISTRATOR OF THE BUREAU FOR THE MIDDLE EAST, UNITED STATES AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, WASHINGTON, DC

Ms. PRYOR. Thank you, Chairman Murphy, Ranking Member Young, and members of the committee.

The past year has been marked by severe and increasing pressures on the countries of the Middle East and North Africa. Shortages in wheat supplies and food price increases worsened food security and strained fragile economies across the region.

Earthquakes in Syria added to the devastation already brought by Bashar al-Assad’s brutal regime. Crises of governance and economic mismanagement continue to threaten stability in Lebanon and Tunisia, and violence increased significantly between Israelis and Palestinians.

USAID has worked diligently to protect development progress while building forward momentum. The investments proposed in our fiscal year 2024 budget continue efforts to partner with the people of the region, build inclusive economic opportunities, and support a peaceful and democratic trajectory for a strategically important area of the world.

Countries of the region face a wide variety of pressures from both inside and outside their borders. More than half of the population is under the age of 30. USAID is helping prepare these young people for the future.

We develop curricula to improve reading and math skills in Lebanon’s primary public schools, help more than 4 million Moroccan students read at grade level, and provide scholarships for deserving students across Egypt and Lebanon.

However, as these young people transition into the workforce, opportunities lag. More than a quarter of young people are unemployed and less than 20 percent of women in the region participate in the workforce.

U.S. investments offer critical opportunities for young people and women. For example, in Lebanon our investments in the private sector have benefited more than 20,000 enterprises including more than 2,000 women-owned businesses.

Regional challenges spill across borders. Since the beginning of Assad’s war more than 5½ million Syrians have sought refuge in bordering countries.

The conflict in Yemen has displaced more than 4.5 million people internally and now the unfolding violence in Sudan has already prompted more than 150,000 people to flee into the MENA region.

The People's Republic of China further complicates regional dynamics. USAID is assisting governments to understand the risks associated with PRC financing and technology.

For example, in Jordan USAID supports the government's ability to assess foreign investment risks to protect Jordanian sovereignty and avoid bad deals that would enable outside influences to affect infrastructure or financing decisions.

The impact of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on food security is another immediate pressure on the region. Thanks to Congress' generous supplemental funding, USAID has been able to slightly alleviate the pressures of dramatically decreased imports of critical foodstuffs such as wheat and cooking oil.

However, given the region's outsized dependence on imports from Ukraine and Russia, addressing shortfalls in domestic production is essential. Improving agricultural production in the world's most water scarce region requires consideration of climate change impacts in our work.

The fiscal year 2024 request significantly increases funding for climate change adaptation. For example, in Jordan, groundwater is depleted twice as fast as it can be replenished. USAID is working with the Government of Jordan to strengthen infrastructure and oversight of water management and incentivize water conservation.

Although food security and water scarcity are shared risks for the region, these threats are also opportunities for collaboration. Notably, USAID has seen expanded interest in MERC grants, particularly from Abraham Accord countries. MERC has received a record number of applications.

Advancing the relationship between Israel and its neighbors is integral to the long-term prospects for the region. To build on this momentum, the fiscal year 2024 budget seeks continued funding for MEPPA and includes flexibility to invest in emerging opportunities.

For example, a portion of the \$90 million requested for the Middle East and North Africa Opportunity Fund could be utilized if the Negev Forum working groups yield tangible areas for investment.

The request also increases support for the West Bank and Gaza by \$40 million to advance public health, climate, economic growth, and other development priorities.

U.S. assistance alone is not enough to address the region's challenges. Governments must protect human rights and take meaningful steps to improve governance and freedom of expression.

However, through Congress and the American people's generosity USAID has been able to not only provide some relief to the extreme pressures the region faces, but also to help shape meaningful paths to the future for the MENA region.

Thank you for your support and I look forward to your questions.
[The prepared statement of Ms. Pryor follows:]

Prepared Statement of Ms. Jeanne Pryor

The past year has been marked by severe and increasing pressures on the countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Shortages in wheat supplies caused by Putin's continued war on Ukraine worsened already tenuous food security

across the region, which also saw poor domestic harvests due to severe droughts and water shortages. Food price increases, driven by supply chain issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war in Ukraine, strained fragile economies across the region. Earthquakes in north and central Syria earlier this year added to the devastation already wrought by Bashar Al-Assad's brutal regime. Crises of governance and economic mismanagement continue to threaten stability in Lebanon and Tunisia, and violence has significantly increased between Israelis and Palestinians.

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has worked diligently to protect development progress while building forward momentum where possible. Strong Congressional support and generous resources for USAID have allowed us, thus far, to mitigate the worst impacts of growing food insecurity in the region. The United States continues to work with the private sector and civil society to offer the region's citizens pathways to prosperous futures and to empower collective advocacy and action. USAID sustained and expanded peacebuilding work across the region through the Nita M. Lowey Middle East Partnership for Peace Act (MEPPA) activities, as well as the Middle East Regional Cooperation (MERC) Program and the Negev Forum to advance initiatives that encourage regional integration, cooperation, and development.

Advancing development support in the face of mounting pressures is particularly critical as strategic competitors such as the People's Republic of China (PRC) invest in predatory alternatives and seek to expand their influence. The investments proposed in our Fiscal Year 2024 budget continue efforts to partner with the people of the region, build inclusive economic opportunities, empower historically underrepresented communities, improve the delivery of social services, and support a peaceful and democratic trajectory for this strategically important area of the world.

ADDRESSING MOUNTING PRESSURES

Countries of the region face a wide variety of pressures from both inside and outside their borders. Within their borders, the region's large youth population pushes against democratic backsliding, corruption, and economic malaise. Regional conflicts have spillover effects as people are displaced into neighboring countries and increase demands on scarce resources. Global interference introduces further complications as actors such as the PRC, Iran, and Russia meddle to advance their own ends. We can predict and invest for some of this, but other unanticipated challenges and opportunities can be met with \$90 million requested for the Middle East and North Africa Opportunity Fund, such as addressing emerging opportunities related to crises in countries such as Libya, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen.

More than half of the regional population is under the age of 30, presenting both unique opportunities and challenges. Through assistance programs, the United States has made significant progress in helping prepare these young people for the future. USAID renovated 130 schools in Jordan over the past 5 years, developed curricula to improve reading and math skills in all of Lebanon's primary public schools, helped more than 4 million Moroccan students read at grade level, and provided higher education scholarships for deserving students across Egypt and Lebanon.

However, as these young people transition into the workforce, opportunities lag in the fragile economies of the region. More than a quarter of young people between the ages of 15 and 24 are unemployed. Despite rising undergraduate graduation rates, less than 20 percent of women in the region participate in the workforce. U.S. Government investments in economic growth offer critical opportunities for young people and women who can no longer rely on bloated public sectors for employment.

Over the past years, USAID helped more than 44,000 small businesses increase sales by \$580 million and create 48,000 jobs in Tunisia. In Lebanon, our investments in the private sector have benefitted more than 20,000 enterprises, including more than 2,500 women-owned businesses. In Libya, USAID's work to strengthen the energy sector dramatically decreased power outages from 158 hours in the first quarter of 2022 to only 3 hours in the first quarter of 2023, providing a significant increase in reliable power for Libyans and their economy.

Although more than 25 percent of young people in the region express low satisfaction with the current economic situation, nearly half remain optimistic it will improve in the future. Through the Fiscal Year 2024 budget, USAID will invest in anti-corruption and governance efforts that will not only empower these young people to advocate for their vision of the future, but also support governments that work to improve their ability to respond to citizens' needs and aspirations.

Thanks to Congressional support, USAID invested prior year funds to help the Government of Iraq improve procurement processes that limit corruption and reauthorize more than 1,500 suspended public works projects. In Egypt, investments in water and sanitation infrastructure have ensured 25 million Egyptians have access

to water and wastewater services. In locations without credible government partners, USAID worked directly with civil society to better equip citizens with tools to engage their authorities, advance their interests, and protect their rights.

Regional Pressures

In addition to the local challenges MENA countries face, regional challenges spill across borders. Since the beginning of Assad's war, more than 5.5 million Syrians have sought refuge in bordering countries. Destabilizing military action and violence in northern and eastern Syria, northern Iraq, and southern Türkiye further impedes the return of internally displaced people, and outside interference, such as Iran's support for the Houthis in Yemen, prolongs a conflict that has displaced more than 4.5 million people internally and left more than 21.6 million in need of humanitarian assistance.

In addition to these enduring challenges, the unfolding violence in Sudan has already prompted more than 330,000 Sudanese to flee into neighboring countries, including over 150,000 in the MENA region, since April 15. Over 1 million people have already been displaced within Sudan, including thousands who were in Sudan already as refugees of other conflicts.

The impacts of this violence quickly cross borders and strain governments' limited resources. In Lebanon, more than 90 percent of Syrian refugees are in need of humanitarian assistance, and in Jordan, despite the Government of Jordan's support, more than 90 percent of Syrian refugee households still report being in debt.

In response to the regional pressures generated by these conflicts, U.S. humanitarian assistance helps address immediate needs, while continuing stabilization and development efforts essential to create a post-conflict pathway to recovery, such as funding for the Syrian Civil Defense, commonly known as the White Helmets. This past fall, Secretary Blinken signed the United States' fourth memorandum of understanding with the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, deepening our partnership with a regional ally that not only acts as host to a large number of Syrian refugees, but also serves as a stabilizing force in the region. The fiscal year 2024 budget request includes \$1.45 billion to support the second year of this memorandum of understanding, which includes provision of direct budget support as well as programs to improve Jordan's economy, governance, and water systems.

Global Pressures

Increased engagement from non-regional actors such as the PRC further complicates regional dynamics as Beijing's purported policy of "non-interference" extends financing as a source of leverage. USAID is assisting governments to understand the risks associated with PRC financing and technology both through programming and engagement with our local partners.

For example, in Morocco, USAID is funding technology alternatives to Chinese companies such as Huawei by assisting the Ministry of Education to develop learning management systems that employ U.S. educational models, opening the Moroccan market for collaboration with trusted technology providers. In Jordan, USAID supports the government's ability to assess foreign investment risks to protect Jordanian sovereignty and avoid opaque foreign involvement through bad deals that would enable outside influences to affect infrastructure or financing decisions. Jordan's telecom providers recently made the momentous decision to switch to trusted and secure vendors for their 5G rollout, which we look to support moving forward.

FOOD SECURITY

Another immediate pressure from a non-regional actor is the impact of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on food security in the region. When USAID last presented the President's Budget to Congress in June 2022, the MENA region was already suffering the impacts of Putin's war. Since last year, thanks to Congress' generosity with supplemental funding related to that war, USAID has been able to slightly alleviate the pressures of dramatically decreased imports of critical foodstuffs such as wheat and cooking oil.

Last year in Tunisia, USAID provided \$60 million to support a social safety net to keep food on the table and kids in schools, and this year USAID funded the purchase of 25,000 metric tons of American durum wheat. However, given the region's outsized dependence on grain and food oil imports from Ukraine and Russia, addressing shortfalls in domestic production is essential to provide long-term relief.

With Congress' support, USAID has expanded work with agriculture and food production to help domestic suppliers better fill the gap between supply and demand. In Egypt, the world's largest grain importer, USAID helped agricultural collection centers improve their storage capacity to decrease grain losses due to spoiling. USAID accomplished this through the introduction of 30 low or no cost solutions for

irrigation, cooling, drying, and harvesting that cut post-harvest losses by a third. USAID programs also helped farmers get more from their seeds, reducing planting costs by 60 percent.

In Lebanon, U.S. assistance helped sustain local vegetable, legume, and dairy production by providing everything from seeds and compost to technical assistance and training. In Yemen, USAID scaled up our agriculture work to train an additional 1,200 farmers on modern approaches like greenhouses, tunnel farming, drip irrigation, and solar-water pumping.

COP 27, the United Nations Conference of Parties on Climate Change, hosted last year by Egypt, was particularly timely given record-breaking heat waves across the region in 2022. According to experts, the Middle East is currently warming at nearly double the rate of the rest of the world. In the future, if average global temperatures rise by two degrees, rainfall is projected to decline by 20–40 percent. As 70 percent of agriculture is rain-fed, this could significantly reduce food security and trigger climate-induced migration and greater political instability in the region. Approximately 52 million people in the MENA region are chronically undernourished and increasing droughts will push more people in that direction.

The Fiscal Year 2023 Request significantly increased funding for climate change adaptation, and does so again in the Fiscal Year 2024 Request to continue this vital work. Sustainable domestic agriculture production in the world's most water-scarce region requires consideration of climate change impacts in all our work.

For example, in Jordan, groundwater is depleted twice as fast as it can be replenished, and leaks, theft, or broken meters lead to water and revenue losses. USAID is working with the Government of Jordan's Ministry of Water and Irrigation to strengthen infrastructure and oversight and incentivize water conservation.

With Fiscal Year 2024 resources, USAID will continue valuable partnerships, such as our work with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to develop energy and water saving irrigation systems. This partnership yielded low-drip technology that cuts energy requirements in half and costs 40 percent less than existing systems, which the irrigation company Toro is now commercializing.

Although food security and water scarcity are shared risks for the region, these threats also offer opportunities for collaboration to address one of the region's largest challenges.

ADVANCING PEACE

Advancing the relationship between Israel and its regional neighbors is integral to any discussion of the long-term prospects for our region. USAID has seen expanded interest in MERC grants, particularly from Abraham Accord countries. In its most recent call for proposals, MERC received 102 applications for joint Arab-Israeli applied research and scientific workshop concepts. This is a near all-time record number of applications for the program over its 40-year history.

To build on this momentum for regional cooperation and peacebuilding with Israel, the Fiscal Year 2024 budget not only sustains ongoing efforts, such as MERC, but also includes flexibility to invest in emerging opportunities, such as initiatives stemming from the Negev Forum, among other regional opportunities, with \$90 million requested for the Middle East and North Africa Opportunity Fund.

Earlier this year, USAID attended the inaugural Working Group meetings of the Negev Forum in Abu Dhabi and serves as the U.S. Government lead for the Food Security and Water Technology and Tourism Working Groups. A portion of funding within the Opportunity Fund is planned to supplement existing resources should these working groups yield tangible areas for investment to further regional cooperation.

In addition to building peaceful relations with regional neighbors, supporting peace between Israel and the Palestinian people is essential to USAID's mission in the region. The Fiscal Year 2024 Budget also requests increased economic support for the West Bank and Gaza by \$40 million to advance development across sectors such as public health, climate, wastewater treatment, and economic growth, providing opportunities. These efforts provide a stabilizing effect, offer alternatives to violence, and improve the lives of millions of Palestinians. The Request also seeks continued funding for the important work of building the trust necessary for an eventual negotiated two-state solution through MEPPA. USAID has completed the first year of programming and is now reviewing applications to build on progress through our second year of funding. All of these programs bolster broader Administration efforts to support equal measures of freedom, security, opportunity, and dignity for Israelis and Palestinians.

CONCLUSION

The United States' continued engagement as a partner for progress, through foreign assistance efforts, technical support, and coalition building ensures that people around the region are aware of the American people's friendship and support for their aspirations. While some governments may criticize the United States, their nation's shop owners proudly display signs announcing USAID's support to their clientele. The United States' commitment to working with the people of the region maintains ties needed for them to withstand meddling from outside influences and to advance reforms for durable prosperity and stability.

U.S. assistance alone is not enough to fully address the region's challenges. Russia's military campaign in Syria in support of the Assad regime must end to help set the conditions for a political solution to the conflict in line with UNSCR 2254. Governments must protect human rights and take meaningful steps to improve governance and freedom of expression. And people across the region must work together to protect limited natural resources. However, through Congress and the American people's generosity, USAID has been able not only to provide some relief for the extreme pressures the region faces, but also to help shape meaningful paths to the future for so many in the MENA region. Thank you for your support and I look forward to your questions.

Senator MURPHY. Thank you very much to both of you for your testimony and for your work.

Ambassador Leaf, let me start with this question of how this budget reflects and communicates American values in the region. This budget cuts funding for democracy assistance in Tunisia while leaving support for the military largely unchanged.

It essentially carries on business as usual with respect to the \$1.3 billion that Egypt gets with some minimal conditions attached to it. Makes no real fundamental change in our relationship with Gulf countries despite their deepening commitment to political repression.

I worry that this budget does not communicate the values that we share in that it does not make any significant changes to the way in which we flow dollars to countries that either have worsening human rights records like Tunisia or countries that have shown no meaningful commitment to change like Egypt, despite the fact that we attach occasional conditionalities on top of the dollars year after year. Am I wrong?

Ambassador LEAF. Senator, let me start with Tunisia, which is one of the toughest nuts to crack, as it were, in terms of just what you have laid out, this complex of issues, the values that we uphold—that we intend to uphold both through our assistance and also through our diplomatic work side by side with real security concerns that we—and U.S. national security interests—that we address through FMS and security assistance more broadly.

I take this back to the summer, of course, of 2021. It has been a 2-year process of adjusting downward our assistance to Tunisian Government authorities and calibrating, scoping downward, even our security assistance.

Let me leave that aside for a moment. Human rights work is done through a variety of other buckets in terms of programming. It has not been zeroed out as part of an approach writ large by the Department.

I can tell you that our advocacy is unstinting, is unflagging, and it has made for quite a bit of friction, frankly, in the relationship that we have with the Government of Tunisia.

That is as it has to be. We have seen this steady relentless closing of civil space, civil society space, pressure on individual activ-

ists, individual politicians, including the aging leader of Ennahda, the clamor against the press, the clamor against Western and other diplomatic missions. It is a really fraught environment.

Our advocacy is relentless publicly and privately. We have scoped downward the security assistance to a degree that we think adequately addresses enduring security interests that we have there, literally, operationally the security of our own diplomatic personnel, but more broadly the effort that we want to see the Tunisian armed forces and law enforcement agencies continue to do their missions in terms of maritime, border security, counterterrorism work and—

Senator MURPHY. I understand that.

Ambassador LEAF. Yes.

Senator MURPHY. The military is participating in President Saied's campaign of repression. They are holding military tribunals against his political opponents. They were there at the parliament denying entry.

I understand there are these limited important missions that the military perform that are commensurate to U.S. national security interest. The question is, is the price for that worth it when our funding of a military that is engaged in this kind of political repression signals a complicity with the Saied regime?

Ambassador LEAF. I would say the following, Senator.

We judge the military, the armed forces, as largely apolitical and that is unquestionably a benefit or, rather, a byproduct of our long relationship with them.

We do not— of course, we have made it very clear and we have advocated against the use of military tribunals to judge civilians. I understand that civilian judges are essentially delegated over those courts. It is a tactic of intimidation, frankly.

We have every reason to think that the armed forces themselves find this distasteful, but we judge them as largely apolitical in this very difficult environment and we do have abiding interests that extend in terms of Tunisia's place on the eastern edge of NATO and its ability to do its tasks.

Senator MURPHY. I do not judge them to be apolitical. I do not think that they have fashioned themselves in a way that would communicate that to the Tunisian people and I am just as bothered about the lack of commitment that we have made to civil society.

I understand that is tough because you got to make sure that the money gets to the right places, but I continue to look forward to working with the Administration on this committee and on the Appropriations Committee to try to get this right.

I guess my focus has been so laser-like on Tunisia because I am kind of giving up that we are going to be able to dramatically change our assistance to Saudi Arabia or to Egypt in a way that telegraphs to the world and to the region that we care in the way that we spend money on human rights.

Tunisia is a place that has slid away from democratic norms very, very fast and I think a reorientation of our policy there would send an important signal beyond Tunisia that your partnership with us is dependent on your commitment to continuing to head your democracy and your civil protections in the right direction.

I am well beyond my time so I will turn it over to Senator Young.

Senator YOUNG. Thank you, Chairman.

Assistant Secretary Leaf, I would like to begin with the Iran-Saudi Arabia agreement. Surprised, I think, all of us that it took place the way it did, brokered by China.

I think where China can play a constructive role, and I believe this is the position of the Administration—certainly, I have heard as much, I think, from the spokesperson at the State Department—that we want to encourage China to do positive things as opposed to negative things around the world.

I also am hopeful that this agreement, moving forward, will continue to reduce tensions in the region. I think that is a hope that has been articulated by the Secretary as well.

I am going to ask you about how we measure progress towards monitoring whether or not this agreement is effective, moving forward, and how the agreement has altered our diplomatic posture.

Before I get into those matters, let us step back. What made the role of China amenable to both parties?

Ambassador LEAF. Thanks very much for that question, Senator. It is a fascinating one and it is one that, as you say, the revelation on March 10 of this détente—and that is what I would really define this as. It is a détente. It is not a reconciliation, a big rapprochement, or a full normalization.

It did surprise a lot of people. It did not entirely surprise us because we have been in a constant dialogue with the Saudis over the course of 2 years, supporting them in their quest to find some *modus vivendi* to get—using one tool, diplomatic engagement, not putting down all the other harder tools that we use bilaterally or collectively but one tool, direct engagement with Tehran to try to get a mitigation of the national security threats that Iran has posed directly and through its proxies principally through the Houthi, but not only with direct attacks on Saudi soil.

More recently—so this has been an effort that has been ongoing through the good offices of the Government of Iraq and the Government of Oman. Saudi Arabia was consistently frustrated in its quest to get the Iranians to acknowledge their role in destabilizing Yemen and in essentially training and equipping with lethal support the Houthis in such a way that they could just launch at will complex attacks on Saudi soil.

More recently the Saudis were really determined since last fall to use a bilateral channel that they had opened up to drive to an end of their engagement in the Yemen conflict and, indeed, to drive to an end of the conflict itself. They did not want the Iranians to scupper that.

This agreement, I would stipulate, is—was not brokered by the Chinese. They hosted it. The Iranians and the Saudis did all of the agreements and the discussions themselves.

What do they want out of it? It is, in the first instance, as I say, focused on Yemen. How will we help them measure it? Partly through the work that we do every day on the high seas, which is interdicting and monitoring and not just monitoring, but interdicting flows of weaponry, but it is a détente that the Saudis drove for a wider calm in the region so that they could pursue their socioeconomic modernization project.

Senator YOUNG. Well, you know how it looks.

Ambassador LEAF. Yes, I do.

Senator YOUNG. It looks like we have diplomatically overplayed our hand vis-à-vis the Saudis and pressing them to come into positions of better behavior on various fronts like human rights and they are hedging their geopolitical bets.

They are extending an arm of if not friendship, certainly, partnership with the Chinese and that is the perception. Diplomatically beyond the hope that this reduces tensions, moving forward, and it is a hope that I and others harbor, it seems as though diplomatically it is a bit of a—it is a hit, so to speak, but I will let you respond to that reflection.

Ambassador LEAF. Sure. Senator, the Chinese obviously have established a relationship with Iran that the U.S. does not have and so, in a sense, the Chinese are on a hook to help police Iranian actions. That is also the way many people saw it in the region and what the Saudis, frankly, hoped to get out of it.

I would say the Saudis are very clear-eyed about the prospects for getting a sudden change in Iranian behavior, a change that would alter four decades of their behavior in the region, but they want to get at it through one tool and they want a general calming in the region and that is to everybody's good. They did not go into this because we pressured them. This was a sovereign decision on their own.

Senator YOUNG. Just very briefly because I have got other colleagues who want to ask questions, how has this in your mind altered our—and how will it alter our diplomatic posture of the Department in the region?

Ambassador LEAF. It will not. It does not alter our posture. I mean, this is something—this is a détente agreement that may have a relaxing effect on the region, may be short lived. It does not—it does not alter our own very robust engagement with all of our Gulf partners, including the Saudis.

Senator MURPHY. Senator Cardin.

Senator CARDIN. Let me thank both of you.

I want to follow up on the chairman's point on U.S. values. Both of you have said that our foreign policy and your—our aid needs to be wrapped in our values and to protect human rights.

The chairman, I think, raised a very valid point of whether that is true in Tunisia. I am going to—he sort of wanted to give up on Egypt and Saudi Arabia. I am not.

Senator MURPHY. I am not giving up.

Senator CARDIN. Okay, but let me talk about Egypt first because we have had it looks like a running battle with the Administration on Egypt on conditionality of aid.

Last year there was a disagreement between the Administration and those of us in Congress on meeting the conditions of conditionality, but one thing is clear. There was some progress made. Five hundred prisoners were released, but at the same time, 750 were detained, so the net was actually more political prisoners than the year before.

Conditionality brought this to the attention. Can you explain to me that if we are wrapping our foreign policy in our values, why you are not suggesting conditionality in our assistance to Egypt?

Ambassador LEAF. Senator, we abide by the conditions obviously set by the Congress, but our going in proposition is that we seek unconditioned aid so that we can use it with the greatest flexibility.

I will not disagree with what you cited in terms of the numbers of those—

Senator CARDIN. Can I just challenge that for one moment?

Ambassador LEAF. Please.

Senator CARDIN. One of the advantages of our system of government, the separation of branches, that we can use the power of both branches working together for the same objectives.

If your objective is for us to advance our values, why would you put us in a difficult position? When we disagreed last year on some of these issues, you said we worked together. We really did not. Why did you not seek help from Congress in regards to the budget you submitted?

Ambassador LEAF. Senator, I would just say that we do each have our separate roles. I think the work that the Congress does in this space sends a powerful signal to the Egyptian Government, but we seek aid, generally speaking, across the board. We seek assistance that is unconditioned, that we can use flexibly, but we have abided by the conditions that Congress has set.

We have evaluated each year carefully and the Secretary has carefully considered the ledger, the record, in making his decisions about whether to grant a waiver or not.

I think we have our respective roles which actually work in synchronicity.

Senator CARDIN. Let me move to the second point and that is your request for funding to try to promote more regional cooperation. The funding sources, you mentioned several, and you also—Ms. Pryor mentioned the Abraham Accords.

Tell me directly where there is funding here to advance the expansion of the Abraham Accord-type arrangements. There has been some progress made in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Certainly, they are not an Abraham Accord country. We recognize that. There has been some progress made there.

Where in this budget do we see your priorities of expanding normalization between countries in the region with Israel?

Ambassador LEAF. I would offer the following.

A large part of our activities are in the diplomatic space, which just go to our normal operating budget and that is what we have used over the course of 2 years to construct the frameworks that we have.

Senator CARDIN. You are a former ambassador to UAE. You know that UAE's interest in normalizing with Israel is complicated, but the economics is certainly a large part of that. Where is the economics in your budget to expand the Abraham Accords?

Ambassador LEAF. Well, I do not think—what I am saying is if the Congress accords us the Opportunity Fund, I think we will draw on that for seed money for things, but we are at the starting point in these structures. We are at the starting point in some of the things that we have negotiated.

Special Presidential Envoy Kerry negotiated and helped design this Project Prosperity, for instance, which does not involve us putting money on the table, but helped design a project that is UAE

funding to Jordan to set up solar plants, providing electricity to Israel, which in turn provides much needed water to Jordan and it is things like that that do not require direct money from us, but we will identify such opportunities along the way. We have a lot going on in the diplomatic space that is not yet visible, frankly.

Senator CARDIN. Well, I just want to associate myself with the chairman. It, to me, is important that we are visible with showing that our foreign policy is based upon our values and I think we could have put a much brighter spotlight on human rights and on our values on these areas than I see in the budget you submitted.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Senator MURPHY. Senator Cruz.

Senator CRUZ. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Biden foreign policy, unfortunately, has made America less safe in every region of the world, but there is no region of the world where it has proven a bigger disaster than the Middle East. In every country in the Middle East, America's position is worse today than it was 2 years ago.

Ms. Leaf, I want to focus in particular on Israel and the PLO. The United States Congress has determined that the Palestine Liberation Organization and its affiliates are a terrorist organization and a threat to the interests of the United States.

It is written in the United States law 22 U.S. Code Chapter 61. Do you agree with that assessment?

Ambassador LEAF. I agree with the assessment. Yes, I do.

Senator CRUZ. Yes. You agree with Congress' assessment that the PLO is a terrorist organization?

Ambassador LEAF. Yes.

Senator CRUZ. Congress, in light of that determination, has imposed multiple sanctions on the PLO. One set of sanctions prohibits the President from granting visas to PLO leaders to enter the United States. Another prohibits Americans from doing business with them.

In October, the Administration waived some of those sanctions and went to the Treasury Department to circumvent others. You did that specifically to bring the secretary general of the PLO to Washington. You held press briefings for him with top State Department officials.

Why did you do that? Why did you bring a terrorist leader to the United States?

Ambassador LEAF. Senator, we have the authority to waive in the national interest and we did so.

Senator CRUZ. I did not ask if you had the authority to waive. I said why did—

Ambassador LEAF. We brought the delegation here to the United States to have discussions that would go to a number of interests that we have that go to Israel's security, frankly.

Senator CRUZ. You were not concerned with the fact that the PLO has been determined to be a terrorist organization. You were not concerned with the fact that you were violating congressional determinations that we should not bring terrorist leaders to Washington.

Instead, you sought a specific waiver and your justification—your public justification, which you gave a variant of that right now, is that you think we should engage with terrorists.

The problem, Ms. Leaf, is that your strategy is failing and it is failing catastrophically. On Friday, you sent a report to Congress officially certifying that the Palestinian Authority and the PLO, and I am going to quote, that they have not met legal requirements for “terminating payments for acts of terrorism against Israeli and U.S. citizens.”

Now, publicly when the Administration defends engaging with terrorists, you claim things are going well, but when you file a statutorily mandated report with Congress, you admit the PLO is continuing what are called “pay to slay” payments.

They are paying for terrorists to murder Americans and to murder Israelis and, nonetheless, this Administration is bringing those terrorist leaders to Washington, is bringing them to cocktail parties to wine and dine political leaders in the Administration, and is also funneling—last year the Biden administration—USAID said—USAID—this is another quote—“has invested \$150 million this past year to empower Palestinians to build thriving and resilient communities” in violation of at least the spirit if not the letter of the Taylor Force Act.

Given that you have now certified to Congress that the PLO is continuing to pay terrorists to murder Americans and murder Israelis, why is the Administration sending \$150 million to them?

Ambassador LEAF. I will let my colleague answer that in a moment, but I would like to get to the question you ask that goes to the issue of both the engagement here in Washington as well as the regular engagements that we have with PA officials.

We are working to bring “pay to slay” to an end, period.

Senator CRUZ. Have you succeeded?

Ambassador LEAF. Not yet. We are working to do so.

Senator CRUZ. You are still sending them money?

Ambassador LEAF. We are working to do so.

Senator CRUZ. Are you still sending them money?

Ambassador LEAF. We do not provide assistance to the Palestinian Authority. We have—

Senator CRUZ. Does USAID? Does the Administration?

Ambassador LEAF. No. Please.

Senator CRUZ. Your testimony is the USAID does not provide money to the PLO?

Ms. PRYOR. We do not. We abhor prisoner payments and we have raised these concerns repeatedly to the Palestinian leadership. We are fully compliant with the Taylor Force Act. No money goes to the Palestinian Authority.

Senator CRUZ. Who have you given the \$150 million to?

Ms. PRYOR. To support the Palestinian people.

Senator CRUZ. Who got the money? Not to support the Palestinians. Like, who specifically deposited the check?

Ms. PRYOR. For example, Palestinian civil society organizations to hold the Palestinian Authority accountable—

Senator CRUZ. Is it your testimony that none of the groups that you have sent that money to are in any way affiliated with the

PLO or other terrorist organizations that are paying to murder Americans and Israelis? Is that your testimony to this committee?

Ms. PRYOR. We work hard to put in place a series of risk mitigation measures to prevent the diversion of assistance to terrorists and terrorist organizations through partner vetting and—

Senator CRUZ. Okay. I am going to try one more time. Is it your testimony that the recipients of that money have no affiliation with terrorist groups that are paying to murder Americans and Israelis?

Ms. PRYOR. Based on the results of our vetting, and when we get allegations that suggest otherwise, we investigate them carefully and take action as needed.

Senator CRUZ. Thank you.

Senator MURPHY. Senator Shaheen.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you both for being here and for your testimony.

Assistant Secretary Leaf, I would like to begin with you. Chairman Murphy mentioned Lebanon in his opening statement and I think most of us watching the multiple crises in Lebanon believe it is teetering on being a failed state, and I wonder if there are more in the way of incentives and disincentives that we can and should be doing to address what is happening in Lebanon right now. Can you speak to that?

I would say the one exception to that is the LAF, which is the one institution that seems to be functioning in Lebanon. I would hope that we are continuing to support their efforts.

Ambassador LEAF. Thank you, Senator.

Well, you are absolutely right that the state of Lebanon—Lebanese society is in a terrible state at this point and it was precisely to avoid the prospect which seemed quite real in 2021 and still seems—feels very real as a prospect to avoid the prospect of state collapse.

We set about a whole series of efforts well beyond humanitarian assistance, but that is an important piece of this, of course, to buck up the resiliency of the population.

To your point, we have used a variety of tools. We have used in-kind assistance to the LAF and the ISF, which, as you say, are two critical state institutions, national institutions, cross confessional, which still have a high degree of public confidence and support, and they are not, perhaps, the last leg standing on this very shaky table, but it is getting that way.

We do regard the direct salary support that Congress has been generous enough to approve to be critical to that task of keeping them able to do not only their security tasks, but all the multiplicity of tasks that have been heaped upon them as this crisis has deepened.

I will let Jeanne talk about the array of programs we have underway, but I will just say one other thing—oh, sorry.

Senator SHAHEEN. I think rather than programs that we have underway, I appreciate that we are doing a number of things to address the humanitarian situation. What I want to know is is there more that we can be doing that we think might move the Lebanese—

Ambassador LEAF. Move the dial. Yes.

Senator SHAHEEN. Yes. The Lebanese Government. That is what I want to know.

Ambassador LEAF. Well, I mean, it is a source of enormous frustration, I can tell you, and we are working collaboratively with several regional partners, European partners, to push the Lebanese parliament to do its job.

The elected representatives of the Lebanese people have failed to do their jobs. The speaker of the parliament has failed to hold a session since January to allow members to put candidates forward for the presidency, to vote on them up or down, and to get to a choice, to get to elect a President who will then appoint and—

Senator SHAHEEN. Well, so, again, should we be thinking about sanctioning some of these players?

Ambassador LEAF. We are looking at those tools. Yes. We are—

Senator SHAHEEN. Because there is a big Lebanese diaspora—I happen to know, I am married to one—in the United States who I think could be helpful in pushing, but as long as we continue to allow this kind of activity to continue, it is hard to get people to provide the kind of pressure from the United States that they need. I want to know what else we can do.

Ambassador LEAF. We—okay. Well, I can assure you, Senator, we are engaging with the diaspora. I meet regularly with members of the Lebanese parliament who come through town. I put heat on them.

I just heard from a senior member of the parliament yesterday asking for some further thoughts. I gave them thoughts when they left. I gave them some more thoughts. We have other partner governments doing the same thing. It is a collective effort.

Senator SHAHEEN. Well, I hope that we might think about what else we can do because what we are doing so far does not seem to be working very well.

I want to move on to al-Hol because you mentioned that, Assistant Secretary Leaf, in your opening comments, and the National Democracy Institute—NDI—is releasing a report on the governance of al-Hol, which finds that camp management and local institutions need urgent governance-related assistance to facilitate the orderly and safe return of Syrians to communities in northeast Syria. Certainly, that is true. Many of the other detainees as well.

CENTCOM Commander Kurilla has made a number of public statements about his concerns about what is happening in the camp and the potential for terrorists—for us to be really cultivating a whole another round of terrorists at that camp.

Again, I wonder what specifically we are doing to facilitate proper governance at the camp.

Ms. PRYOR. We are working closely with the Self Administration of North and East Syria (SANES) and the SDF to encourage countries to take back their citizens. Most of the residents of al-Hol are women and children and every day those children remain is another chance for them to get radicalized.

There has been progress in third country nationals returning home and, most notably, the largest percentage of the population in the camp are Iraqis and the Iraqi Government has begun to brought home some of the families that are in al-Hol.

We are working closely with the State Department to make sure that those families are reintegrated back into their communities of origin successfully. We are also looking at plans for how we can reintegrate Syrians in al-Hol and have them return home to their communities of origin. Between those two groups, those are the overwhelming majority of the population in the camp.

Senator SHAHEEN. In February, Senator Graham and I, along with the chair and ranking member of this committee, reintroduced the Syria Detainee and Displaced Persons Act to empower a senior coordinator to synchronize a whole-of-government effort to address the growing crises in the camps in Syria.

The role is currently filled by the coordinator for counterterrorism, which is a position that remains unfilled due largely to the obstruction of members of this committee.

I would urge the chair and ranking member to encourage the full committee to block the hold on that position and to move this legislation in a way that is going to be critical if we are going to address what needs to happen in that camp.

Thank you.

Senator MURPHY. Thank you, Senator Shaheen.

Joining our subcommittee today, Senator Van Hollen.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Thank you. Thank you, Chairman Murphy, and thank you both for your testimony and your service, and I want to associate myself with the comments the chairman made in his opening.

Ambassador Leaf, I have a question regarding our efforts to secure accountability in the case of the shooting death of Shireen Abu Akleh. As you know, she is an American citizen. She is a journalist. The President and others have spoken out strongly about the importance of protecting journalists, especially in conflict zones.

Your deputy testified in front of this committee on May 4, Yael Lempert. She said in response to a question I asked, "I can tell you that we continue to underscore at the level of the Secretary of State the importance of accountability in her killing and we will continue to do so."

Do you endorse and support that statement?

Ambassador LEAF. I do.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. As you probably know, I have been trying for weeks and weeks now to get a hold of the updated summation report done by the General Fenzel, the USSC, regarding his—the shooting death of Shireen Abu Akleh.

I just want to tell you I have run out of patience. I expect to be able to view the report wherever you want in a classified setting by Friday and I will otherwise use whatever powers I have here in ways that I have never done before.

I am a dear friend of the Foreign Service, but I can tell you I am at the end of my rope in terms of a simple request for a report.

Ambassador LEAF. I understand, Senator, and I do apologize for the delay and we expect to bring that report forth shortly to the committee for your viewing. I do apologize.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Well, I appreciate that, Madam Ambassador. I know how much you have worked on these issues.

Let me ask you about a recent operation that was conducted in the West Bank by an Israeli border security unit that falls under

the authority of the minister of security, Ben-Gvir, who, as you know, has responsibility for the national police and border security.

First, I think it is worth reminding people about Ben-Gvir and his history. As I am sure you know, he was previously convicted by an Israeli court for racist incitement against Palestinian Arabs and for supporting the Jewish supremacist Kahanist terror organization, which for some time had been designated as a terrorist organization by the United States Government.

He now heads a far right party called "Jewish Power," which is the ideological successor to Kahane's party, and he is now a member of the Netanyahu cabinet, a very far right cabinet.

He recently participated in the flag march through the old city of Jerusalem where marchers chanted, "Death to Arabs." You can view it on video.

He days later visited the Temple Mount al-Haram al-Sharif, where he declared, "We are in charge here in Jerusalem and all of the land of Israel," a statement where the State Department expressed its concern with, "the provocative visit and the accompanied inflammatory rhetoric."

This is the individual who is the minister of security and I wanted to ask you if you saw this piece that appeared in *The Washington Post* just the other day, headline "Israeli agents conducted raid against militants in civilian area, killing a child." Did you see that, Madam Ambassador?

Ambassador LEAF. I saw it, yes.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Okay. They point out in this very detailed article where they examined video evidence that an innocent 14-year-old boy was killed in the crossfire in a raid that was part of an extrajudicial killing.

The Washington Post shared its findings with five experts in international law, all of whom said that the deadly raid appeared to violate the prohibition on extrajudicial killings. That is a "finding" from the article.

My question to you is, as you know, the Leahy Law prohibits the provision of U.S. security assistance to foreign security force units where there is credible information that the unit has committed a gross violation of human rights which includes extrajudicial killings.

Has the State Department vetted this unit that is the subject of this *Washington Post* report?

Ambassador LEAF. I do not know offhand, but I will get you an answer, Senator.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. If you could, and when you do if you could also give me a list of all the other units that have been vetted.

Ambassador LEAF. Absolutely.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Both those under the control and command of Ben-Gvir, but also those other units in the military, and I appreciate that and look forward to your response. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Senator MURPHY. Thank you, Senator Van Hollen.

Senator KAINE.

Senator KAINE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ms. Pryor, U.S. aid to the region is pretty heavily focused on foreign military sales, but it is the region's young population which

is a very dynamic one that is going to determine the future of the region.

Talk a little bit about the development goals the U.S. is focused on in this region and particularly with respect to programs that might affect young people.

Ms. PRYOR. Thank you. Yes, we are deeply concerned that half the population of the region is under the age of 30. They could be a destructive force or a great force for change. We are focusing on the latter.

We are doing extensive work in getting scholarships to needy students in the region, developing their skills to enable them to be able to get jobs, and then also there is a real entrepreneurial spirit amongst the youth in the region.

I had the opportunity last fall in Iraq to visit young people who are not waiting on the public sector. They are going out and starting their own businesses, and so we are working hard to try and make sure that they get the technical assistance and know-how in setting up a business and then also access to financing to make their dreams a reality.

Also, we are supporting civil society and youth are actively engaged in civil society throughout the region, again, to help them advocate for change within their own countries. Thank you.

Senator KAINE. Secretary Leaf, let me ask you this. The President's budget makes a \$271 million request for partnerships with Iraq and that puts Iraq on par with some of our closest global partners.

Together with the ranking member, Senator Young, and many others—Senator Murphy—we have advocated for the repeal of the Iraq war authorizations on the grounds that a partner is not an enemy and we are now in a position, thank goodness—I mean, it is a tribute to both U.S. investment and Iraqi magnanimity—we are a partner and Iraq can play—really, is playing and can continue to play a really important role in the region.

If you could talk about the strategic goal for this particular request and the partnership—the security partnership we have with Iraq, please.

Ambassador LEAF. Certainly.

Senator, it is a great question and I will just say I have been to Iraq twice in the last 6 or 7 months and even in that period I have seen some real dynamic change, change to the good much like Jeanne discussed. This sort of economic vitality for the first time is really evident in that country, and I have been going to Iraq since 2010.

Strategically, what I would say is our approach to Iraq is—Alina Romanowski, our brilliant ambassador out there, puts it as it is a 360-degree relationship. It is no longer the singular security CT mil-mil relationship. It is full spectrum.

I also like to think of another analogy, which is that Iraq is a keystone state. It is a keystone in the arch of regional security and stability. What is good within Iraq in terms of its achievement of security, stability, and greater and greater sovereignty internal and external, what is good for Iraq then becomes good for, certainly, the near neighborhood, but for the broader region.

Our FMF relationship is solid and strong and, I think, over the course of time has brought some really significant results to the point that we are far away from the days of 2014 when we saw that just calamitous collapse of parts of the Iraqi Security Forces in the face of waves of ISIS fighters.

We are a long way from that to the point where the Iraqi air force can itself do counter ISIS missions. The Iraqi Security Forces can hold territory that they have cleared of ISIS fighters. They are a more professional force. They are increasingly capable, but we are in it for the long game both on the sort of civilian economic side of things and then in terms of our security assistance. It is a complex partnership, I will say, and things do not change under just one Prime Minister or one government.

We are seeing Iraq lean into the regional integration, which is also a hallmark of our approach is to encourage in both directions the neighborhood to embrace Iraq and Iraq to embrace the neighborhood.

Senator KAINE. Thank you for that, and just two comments as I close.

We have now gone more than 2 years without a Senate-confirmed counterterrorism coordinator even as terrorism networks grow and expand around the globe, and they remain a threat not only to our partners, but to the United States, to Israel, many other nations.

The nominee for the position—the Biden administration’s nominee, Elizabeth Richard, is a highly qualified FSO. This committee has cleared her twice, once in the 117th Congress and now again in the 118th, and I would really hope we could get her confirmed on the floor because this is a bill that is very important.

Then, lastly, if I could just say to you, Secretary Leaf, I am really worried about Hezbollah’s networks in Latin America. I am the chair of the Americas Subcommittee so I spend a lot of time in the Americas.

As I do I hear more and more and more about activities of Hezbollah and other Middle East-based organizations—terrorist organizations—and they are getting—their level of activity in the Americas is picking up.

I would just encourage coordination between your section and Assistant Secretary Nichols.

Ambassador LEAF. I will certainly do so.

Senator KAINE. Great. Thank you. I yield back, Mr. Chair.

Senator MURPHY. Thank you, Senator Kaine.

The ranking member and I will ask a few final questions in a short second round. I will turn it over to Senator Young to start.

Senator YOUNG. Thank you, Chairman. I would like to ask a couple of questions about Yemen since I have you both here. Probably not a surprise for those repeat visitors.

The United States, we have been the extensive provider of humanitarian assistance amidst the conflicts in Yemen and in recent years. If a stable and verifiable peace agreement were to manifest itself in Yemen, what immediate steps is the Department and USAID preparing to take to get a potential new era of Yemen’s history off to the right start?

Ambassador LEAF. Thank you, Senator. I will speak first to the diplomatic efforts and then I will ask Jeanne to jump in on the assistance side.

This has been a 2-plus-year, almost 2½-year quest. When the Administration took office, of course, there was a raging war. There were myriad attacks every day on Saudi Arabia and eventually on the UAE as well coming from the Houthi and these were complex attacks that were almost impossible to defend against, given the use of drones and rockets and missiles and so forth.

With a lot of hard work—diplomatic work—coupled with the U.N. envoy, the Saudis, and so forth, we were able to collectively drive to a truce in April of last year, which has not miraculously, but has held through hard, hard work principally by the Saudis and buttressed by the work of the Omanis, the UAE to some degree, but, of course, our own great envoy, Tim Lenderking, our mission in the field.

The Saudis are conceivably in the end game of their discussions to take their discussions with—their negotiations with the Houthi from this bilateral channel to flip it to the UN.

The UN Envoy, Hans Grundberg, was here last week. We had intensive consultations with him. He is charting out the work that he will do on the other side. I know, having spoken to one of our Gulf partners, they are eager to host these talks that would be Yemeni-Yemeni talks.

We—suffice to say we are—our sleeves are already rolled up, ready to plunge in and this would be UN-mediated, but U.S.-assisted and we would bring in other partners as needed.

Senator YOUNG. Ms. Pryor.

Ms. PRYOR. Unfortunately, we had to pull out—our assistance out of the north because we were no longer able to assure that assistance could not be diverted to terrorist organizations.

If there were a durable peace agreement, one of the first things that we would do—and this is where the Opportunity Fund that we requested would be invaluable to us—is we would want to move back into the north to help those communities recover from conflict.

Senator YOUNG. The money would be used to help those communities that were otherwise engaged in terrorist activities or threatening activities towards their neighbors begin economic activity and sustain themselves. Maybe you could tease out what you intend to use them for.

Ms. PRYOR. We would need to be mindful and we do use partner vetting in Yemen because we would not still want our assistance to go to any terrorist or terrorist organizations in the north.

For example, we could help women set up small businesses, ensure there is primary health care for children. Those are just a couple of examples.

Ambassador LEAF. I would also add, Senator Young, that it would be our full expectation—and not just expectation, we know this would be the case—we would turn to our GCC partners for their stabilization and development assistance as well.

Senator YOUNG. Okay. If you could continue to keep me posted, especially if we see a longer-term agreement being struck in this area about the sort of preparations you are taking and, as impor-

tantly, the assistance you might require from the Hill, I would really appreciate that.

Ambassador LEAF. Absolutely.

Senator YOUNG. Chairman.

Senator MURPHY. Thank you, Senator Young.

Two final questions from me.

Fred Wehrey, who knows more about Libya than most anybody else in this town, has an interesting piece from last month in Foreign Policy and it is entitled “Why is not the U.S. in Libya?”, subtitled “Outside powers take a growing interest in this oil-rich African state where the U.S. Embassy has been closed since 2014.”

Ambassador Leaf, the budget request includes a request for a 6.6 percent increase in worldwide security protection dollars for additional local guard forces and the potential resumption of a diplomatic presence inside Libya.

Obviously, we have been trying to supplement from Tunisia our activities and diplomatic efforts in Libya, but it does seem time that we bring back a physical presence there. Can you just update us on progress?

Ambassador LEAF. Absolutely. I would say we are making good progress. I am not going to put down a timeframe yet, but we are moving in that direction.

I will just say that our—my staff in the Libya external office, temporarily resident in Tunis gets over to Libya at least once if not several times a month. I went there myself in March and overnights in Tripoli and had a day in Benghazi, as well. The security conditions are never as quite solid as you think they are. We had a reflection of that over the weekend.

Nonetheless, we think the security conditions are moving exactly in the direction where we could put a persistent presence. Certainly, lots of our European friends and regional partners are there.

What I was gratified to see as I made the rounds—and I went all over Tripoli and Benghazi to see sort of all the local chieftains, if you will, as well as some people outside government—what I was struck by was how well-known and liked my staff were in Tripoli and Benghazi, how much our counsel was sought. There is a hunger for us to be back and I am eager to get us back on the ground.

Senator MURPHY. That is good news. I think you are right. We have enormous influence and leverage there made much easier by an embassy reopening. I look forward to continuing to work with you on that.

A final question is this. Senator Cardin was asking questions about the expansion of the Abraham Accords. There has been plenty of open source reporting about early talks or early interest being expressed by Saudi Arabia in some normalization process.

Those reports have included a list of requests that the Saudis have made of us as a condition of normalization. I am not asking you to get into the details of those talks today. Undeniably, a normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel would be a pivotal and immensely positive development, in many ways a sort of certification of a détente that has been underway for years. We should be actively engaged in trying to help make that happen.

One of the requests that have been reported in open source reporting is that the Saudis are seeking a defense guarantee from the United States—some kind of security guarantee—and I guess the only question I would ask right now is to simply confirm that any security or defense guarantee provided to Saudi Arabia would be submitted to Congress for ratification. That is, obviously, something that cannot be done without congressional consent.

Ambassador LEAF. You are absolutely right, and without getting into the details of private discussions to date, we are very mindful of the sort of the right and left limits of what becomes a treaty versus something else.

Let me just offer a couple of comments, though. There is a lot of misreporting and a lot of hyperventilation in the press, a lot of excitable rumint, I would say, in the press, especially in the Israeli press.

I mean, they are just electric with the idea that Saudi Arabia might take that step, and I would say there is no question that is an end goal for us that we bring Saudi Arabia and Israel together.

We would love to bring the entire region in that direction, but, clearly, Saudi Arabia is a real mover in that space and I think it is fair to say that the Crown Prince has been very candid with folks outside of government, Americans and others—that that is very much on his mind.

He has a lot of other things in play, a lot of other balls in the air, mostly related to Vision 2030, but that is clearly something that he has got in mind as a step he wants to move to.

There are a lot of things in the mix in that space, and just as with other countries we see plenty of space to get things done even before normalization were to be achieved and those are in the realm of people to people, sports, educational, cultural, just a gradual opening up and relaxation of what heretofore were criminalized activities between Saudis and Israelis.

Of course, we not only worked to get done a really important piece, which was opening airspace for Israeli airliners, but we got the end piece opened as well, which is Oman's airspace.

Even with two countries that do not have formal relations, there is a lot of room there to work.

Senator MURPHY. I appreciate that response. Full or partial security assurances should not be given, and are not given, lightly.

Ambassador LEAF. No, I understand that. Yes.

Senator MURPHY. I think this committee would have a lot to say about whether the conduct of Saudi Arabia over the course of the last 5–10 years has merited that kind of commitment. I look forward to continuing to be in a discussion with you about this broader topic.

I think that is it for testimony. I appreciate our colleagues on both sides of the aisle for being with us today. Really important topic.

We are going to keep the record open until the close of business Friday, and with that, this hearing is adjourned.
[Whereupon, at 11:14 a.m., the hearing was adjourned.]

ADDITIONAL MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

RESPONSES OF AMBASSADOR BARBARA LEAF TO QUESTIONS
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR JEANNE SHAHEEN

Question. Amidst serious and enduring repression, Egypt is scheduled to hold presidential elections in 2024. Does the Administration intend to fund any election monitoring or other initiatives connected to the upcoming elections in Egypt? If so, why is the Administration choosing to invest in the elections process given the impossibility of having a free and fair election without drastic reforms to existing laws and policies on free expression, free association, and free assembly in the country?

Answer. The Biden-Harris administration does not intend to fund any election monitoring initiatives in connection with the upcoming Egyptian elections.

Question. Please explain if any U.S. assistance is currently funding or will be funding the Tunisian Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Justice or National Police. If U.S. funding is going to any of these entities, please detail the nature of the assistance and why the United States is funding these bodies, given their central and influential role in carrying out Tunisian President Kais Saied's alarming repression.

Answer. We share concerns over the Tunisian Government's troubling escalation against political opponents and perceived critics. While U.S. assistance to Tunisia has decreased since July 25, 2021, we provide targeted support to the Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Justice, and National Police, strictly focused on the vital national interests of protecting U.S. citizens, diplomatic personnel and facilities, and countering terrorism, while promoting accountability and the rule of law.

RESPONSES OF AMBASSADOR BARBARA LEAF TO QUESTIONS
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR CHRIS VAN HOLLEN

Question. In Senator Van Hollen's questioning, he referenced a *Washington Post* investigation that "shared its findings with five experts in international law, all of who said the deadly raid appeared to violate the prohibition on extrajudicial killings." A unit known as "Yamam" in Israel's border police conducted the raid. When asked by the Senator whether this unit has been vetted pursuant to the Leahy Law, Ass. Sec. Leaf confirmed that "I'll get you an answer." Given the evidence presented by *The Washington Post*, has the State Department determined if it should vet this unit to determine whether providing it with U.S. assistance would violate the Leahy Law?

Answer. The Department is aware of *The Washington Post* article detailing recent operations by Israeli security forces. I understand Israel is investigating the incident; we continue to urge investigations into all such operations that result in civilian casualties, in order to ensure accountability if a gross violation of human rights has occurred and to prevent similar events in the future. The Department has a process to assess whether any Israeli security force units are ineligible for security assistance, consistent with the Leahy Law, and public reports of alleged violations are considered during this process. As part of this ongoing process, a list of any units assessed to be ineligible will be transmitted to Congress consistent with the Leahy law, which requires such list be transmitted regularly to the recipient government and Congress.

Question. Have other Israeli units been vetted, or are any currently being vetted, under the Leahy provision? If so, please describe the outcome of each such case. How many, if any, have been deemed ineligible for U.S. security assistance?

Answer. The United States concluded a Leahy Ineligible Unit Agreement with Israel in December 2021. The Department has established procedures to develop a list of any ineligible Israeli security forces and will provide any such list of units assessed as ineligible to the Government of Israel and transmit any such list to Congress, consistent with the Leahy law.

Question. How many Israeli or Egyptian units, if any, have been remediated pursuant to the State & DoD joint remediation policy for U.S. security assistance due

to Egypt and/or Israel “taking effective steps to bring the responsible members of the security forces unit to justice?”

According to the State Department’s 2022 Human rights report, in Egypt there are “credible reports of: unlawful or arbitrary killings, including extrajudicial killings by the government or its agents . . . torture and cases of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by the government . . .” A Human Rights Watch investigation from 2021 noted that evidence they examined of 14 individuals killed by Egyptian security forces during multiple raids were probable extrajudicial executions. An Amnesty International report cites four videos posted online between July and August 2022 depicting potential extrajudicial execution of three unarmed men in custody by the military and affiliated tribal militias in North Sinai.

Answer. To date, the Secretary has not determined that any otherwise ineligible Egyptian or Israeli security forces unit should be remediated on the basis of those governments “taking effective steps to bring the responsible members of the security forces unit to justice.”

Question. Given the evidence presented by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, has the State Department determined if it should vet these units to determine whether providing them with U.S. assistance would violate the Leahy Law?

Answer. Yes, the Department is currently engaged in a review. Globally, the Department reviews allegations of gross violations of human rights (GVHR) by security force units that receive U.S. foreign security assistance, to assess whether such security force units are credibly implicated in a GVHR and whether the government is taking effective steps to bring the responsible members of the security forces unit to justice.

Question. Have other Egyptian units been vetted, or are any currently being vetted, under the Leahy provision? If so, please describe the outcome of each such case. How many, if any, have been deemed ineligible for U.S. security assistance?

Answer. The Department continues to regularly vet Egyptian security forces units that are identified as potential recipients of applicable assistance. The Department makes publicly available, to the maximum extent practicable, an annual list of units from which it withheld assistance pursuant to the Leahy law. To date, no Egyptian security force unit has appeared on these lists. A unit’s absence from the public list does not mean a given unit is eligible for applicable assistance.