



Iran Update, July 28, 2023

By Amin Soltani and Ashka Jhaveri

July 28, 2023

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Key Takeaways

1. Iranian-backed militias deployed to the Syrian desert near the Al Tanf Deconfliction Zone throughout July, possibly as part of a coercive campaign to expel the United States from Syria. Iran, Russia, and the Syrian regime may be setting conditions to attack US forces at the Al Tanf Garrison.
2. Regime officials are making preparations in anticipation of future protests commemorating Mahsa Amini's killing on September 18, 2022.



1. DEIR EZ ZOR - Iranian-backed militias deployed to the Syrian desert near the Al Tanf Deconfliction Zone throughout July, possibly as part of a coercive campaign to expel the United States from Syria. Iran, Russia, and the Syrian regime may be setting conditions to attack US forces at the Al Tanf Garrison.
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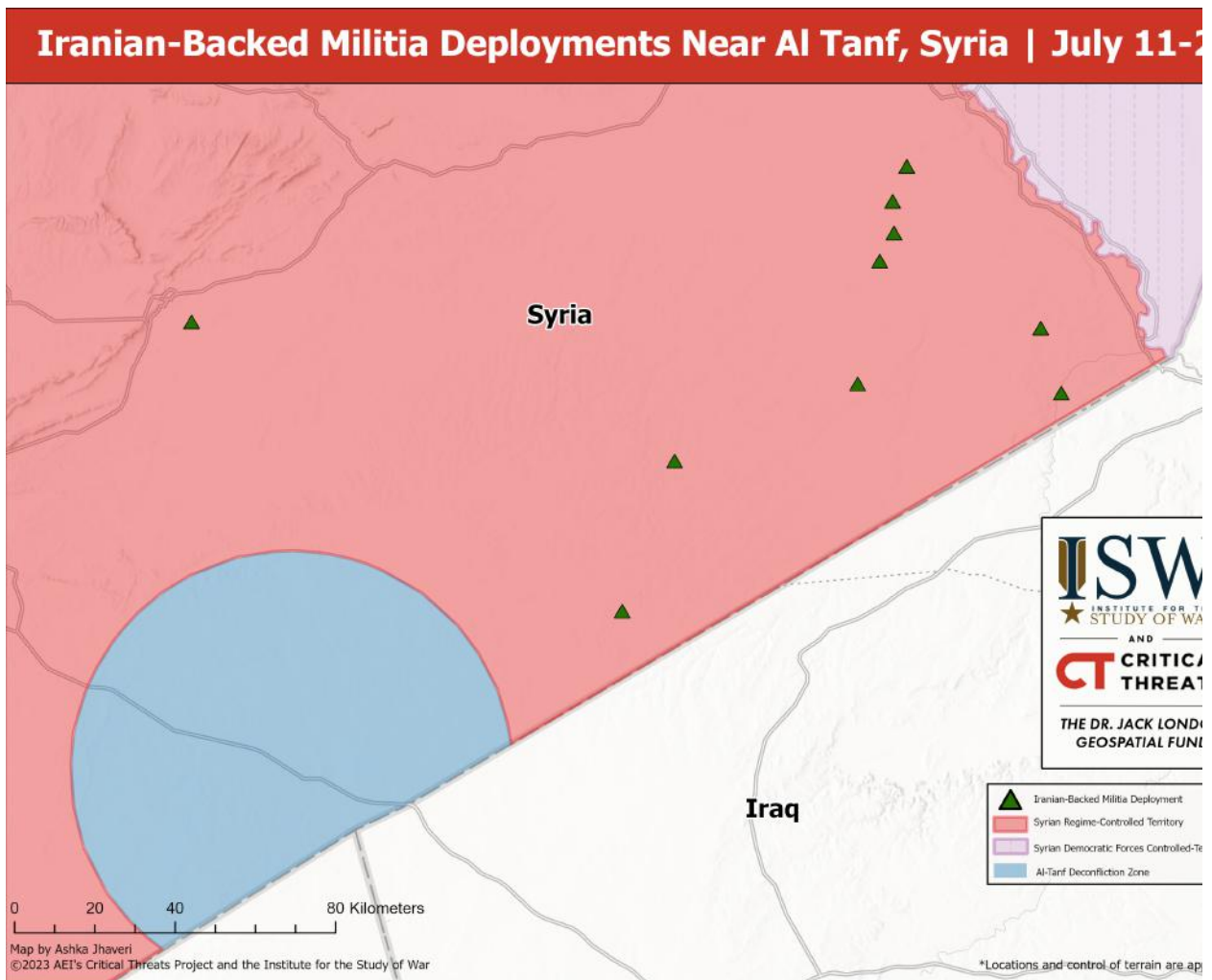
Iranian Activities in the Levant

This section covers Iranian efforts to consolidate and expand Tehran's economic, military, and political influence throughout the Levant especially in Syria. This section examines some of the many campaigns that Iran is pursuing to achieve this strategic objective. CTP will update and refine our assessments of these campaigns over time and in future updates.

Iranian-backed militias deployed to the Syrian desert near the Al Tanf Deconfliction Zone throughout July, possibly as part of a coercive campaign to expel the United States from Syria. Iranian-backed militias initially deployed to lines of control with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) between July 7 and July 20.^[i] The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force (IRGC QF) also ordered militias to deploy to several points in the desert between July 11 and July 26. The Syrian Arab Army 47th Regiment and Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) deployed on July 11 to military points, including one approximately 35 kilometers from the 55-kilometer exclusion zone around the Al Tanf Garrison.^[ii] Militias deployed to the T-2 Pumping Station where Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) stores Iranian drones.^[iii] Militias deployed to Talila Camp on July 16, south of Palmyra.^[iv] LH and Fatemiyoun simulated a battle using Iranian-made rockets, drones, and artillery at the Talila Camp on June 10.^[v] Iranian-backed militias withdrew from positions on July 26 in Deir ez Zor and moved towards the desert ostensibly following concerns from Russia that the United States would conduct an attack in Deir ez Zor Province. There are no indications that the United States or SDF are planning an incursion into regime-controlled territory.

Iran, Russia, and the Syrian regime may be setting conditions to attack US forces at the Al Tanf Garrison. An unspecified US DoD official told Pentagon reporters that a Russian aircraft was collecting intelligence on the Al Tanf garrison during flyovers, most recently on July 14.^[vi] The official noted that Russian military activity stems from growing coordination between Moscow, Tehran, and the Syrian regime to pressure the United States to leave Syria. Russian forces also are conducting an information operation that falsely presents the United States as an imminent threat to Syria. Russian forces, for example, organized a military exercise for the Syrian Arab Army from July 16 to July 18 that simulated a US chemical weapons attack and accused the United States of transporting chemical weapons into Al Tanf to prepare for false flag attacks.^[vii] The Russian framing of the United States as an aggressor and evidence of intelligence sharing with Iran suggests Russia and Iran are creating optimal conditions to attack. Iranian-backed militias have several military facilities in the desert surrounding the exclusion zone with capabilities to surveil and attack the Al Tanf Garrison.^[viii]

Iranian-backed militias withdrew from unspecified positions in Deir ez Zor Province and redeployed to the Syrian desert near the Iraq-Syria border on July 26.^[ix]



Iranian Domestic and Political Affairs

This section covers factors and trends affecting regime decision-making and stability. CTP will cover domestic politics, significant protest activity, and related issues here.

Regime officials are making preparations in anticipation of future protests commemorating Mahsa Amini's killing on September 18, 2022. The regime is preparing for potential future protests in two ways, namely imposing further control over universities and monitoring cyberspace. IRGC Commander Adviser and former IRGC Intelligence Organization head Hossein Taeb warned on July 20 that universities will be the source of future anti-regime activities.^[x] IRGC Political Deputy Yadollah Javani similarly warned on July 21 that universities will be the source of future “disturbance” and that the IRGC will “securitize” universities in the near future.^[xi] IRGC Deputy Commander Rear Admiral Ali Fadavi met with university administrators and professors in Markazi Province on July 27 to emphasize the importance of universities in promoting Islamic and revolutionary values as enemies seek to undermine the authority of the Islamic revolution.^[xii] Iranian authorities have also targeted universities in recent weeks, purging anti-regime university professors, limiting the activities of student organizations, and imposing penalties on students engaged in civic activities.^[xiii] Universities became a major site of unrest throughout the Mahsa Amini movement and previous unrest which students largely spearheaded.^[xiv] Iranian students are, furthermore, planning protests in early September in commemoration of Mahsa Amini's killing, as CTP previously reported.^[xv] The Supreme National Security Council has also approved measures as of July 27 for the Intelligence and Security Ministry to monitor cyberspace to establish “psychological security.”^[xvi] Regime officials have repeatedly accused protesters of causing “psychological insecurity.”^[xvii] Iranian leadership has, furthermore, voiced concerns about the resumption of anti-regime protests in recent weeks and threatened to take “decisive action” against individuals who threaten Iranian national security as Iran endures “its most sensitive time ever.”^[xviii]

The regime also uses internet disruptions, security service deployments, and mandatory veiling enforcement to crack down on protests. The regime repeatedly employed internet disruptions as a security measure during the 2022 Mahsa Amini protests and senior regime officials have often discussed implementing countrywide internet shutdowns in anticipation of further unrest even after the Mahsa Amini movement culminated.^[xix] The regime not only increased security service deployments throughout the 2022 protests but also did so in anticipation of unrest around the Chahar Shanbeh Souri and Nowrouz national holidays in March 2023.^[xx] The Iranian Law Enforcement Command (LEC) resumed the country-wide deployment of its morality patrol officers to enforce mandatory veiling on July 16.^[xxi] The morality patrol enforces dress codes that adhere the regime's standards and is the unit responsible for arresting and killing Mahsa Amini in September 2022.^[xxii] The regime seeks to address noncompliance with the hijab law because it views violations as a threat to regime stability.^[xxiii]

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Iran Update, July 27, 2023

By Ashka Jhaveri, Annika Ganzeveld and Johanna Moore

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Key Takeaways

1. Iran-backed militias withdrew from unspecified positions in Deir ez Zor Province and redeployed to the Syrian desert near the Iraq-Syria border, possibly as part of a coercive campaign to expel the United States from Syria.
2. Ashab al Kahf claimed an improvised explosive device (IED) attack on a US logistics convoy in Diwaniyah on July 26, indicating the group has started an IED campaign to expel the United States from Iraq.
3. Iran is simultaneously lobbying China and Russia for assistance in developing Iranian infrastructure projects.



- 1). DEIR EZ ZOR - Iran-backed militias withdrew from unspecified positions in Deir ez Zor Province and redeployed to the Syrian desert near Iraq-Syria border, possibly as part of a coercive campaign to expel the United States from Syria.
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Iranian Activities in the Levant

This section covers Iranian efforts to consolidate and expand Tehran's economic, military, and political influence throughout the Levant, especially in Syria. This section examines some of the many campaigns that Iran is pursuing to achieve this strategic objective. CTP will update and refine our assessments of these campaigns over time and in future updates.

Iran-backed militias withdrew from unspecified positions in Deir ez Zor Province and redeployed to the Syrian desert near the Iraq-Syria border, possibly as part of a coercive campaign to expel the United States from Syria. Iranian-backed militias deployed to lines of control with the SDF between July 7 and 20.^[i] The militias moved to the positions notionally because Russian forces expressed concerns that the United States would conduct an attack in Deir ez Zor Province.^[ii] UK-based anti-Syrian regime media *The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights* reported Iranian-backed militias reduced their forces "significantly and suddenly" on July 26 to prevent a US offensive, despite there being no indications that the SDF or US are planning an incursion into regime-controlled territory.^[iii] The redeployment is part of a trend that CTP has observed since early July, however, in which Iranian-backed forces have deployed to the central Syrian desert. The IRGC QF ordered dozens of military vehicles of the Iranian-affiliated Syrian Arab Army 47th Regiment and Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) to deploy on July 11 to military points approximately 35 kilometers from the 55-kilometer exclusion zone around the Al Tanf Garrison.^[iv] The PMF also deployed to unspecified positions in the desert near Abu Kamal on July 26.^[v] Iranian leaders have signaled preparation to resume its campaign to expel US forces from the Middle East by attacking and killing US service members.^[vi]

Iranian Activities in Iraq

This section covers Iranian efforts to consolidate and expand Tehran's economic, military, and political influence throughout Iraq. This section examines some of the many campaigns that Iran is pursuing to achieve this strategic objective. CTP will update and refine our assessments of these campaigns over time and in future updates.

Ashab al Kahf claimed an improvised explosive device (IED) attack on a US logistics convoy in Diwaniyah on July 26, indicating the group has started an IED campaign to expel the United States from Iraq.^[vii] AK claimed a separate IED attack on a US logistics convoy in Hilla, Babil Province on July 24.^[viii] Iranian-backed Iraqi proxies' last IED attack on a US logistics convoy in Iraq took place in January 2023.^[ix] These US logistics convoys are commonly operated by Iraqi contractors, not US servicemembers.^[x] Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba Secretary General Akram Kaabi released a "final warning" to US forces on July 26 prior to the IED attack the same day.^[xi] Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba has close ties to Ashab al Kahf in coordinating previous attack campaigns and promoting Ashab al Kahf activity on Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba channels.^[xii] CTP cannot currently determine if this a coordinated effort between Ashab al Kahf and Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba.

Iranian Domestic and Political Affairs

This section covers factors and trends affecting regime decision-making and stability. CTP will cover domestic politics, significant protest activity, and related issues here.

Iran is simultaneously lobbying China and Russia for assistance in developing Iranian infrastructure projects. Iranian Ambassador to Russia Kazem Jalali called for "accelerating" the construction of the Rasht-Astara railway during a meeting with Russian State Duma International Affairs Committee Chairman Leonid Slutsky in Moscow, Russia on July 27.^[xiii] The Rasht-Astara railway is part of the International North South Transit Corridor (INSTC), a transit route which, once completed, will connect Russia and Central Asia to the Persian Gulf via Iran.^[xiv] Iran attaches importance to developing the INSTC to bolster Iran's economy and become a regional "transit hub."^[xv] Russia agreed to partially finance Iranian construction of the Rasht-Astara railway on May 17.^[xvi] Ardabil Province officials separately presented 21 investment opportunities, including infrastructure projects, to Qinghai Province, China officials at the China-Iran Economic and Commercial Development Conference in Tehran on July 27.^[xvii] Ardabil Province Governor Hamid Ameli previously called on Chinese railway companies to investment in Iran's plan to connect the Ardabil railway to Russia and Central Asia in April.^[xviii] An Iranian transportation official additionally called on China to invest in the construction of a Chinese-Iranian-Afghan railway corridor on July 13.^[xix]

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Iran Update, July 26, 2023

By Amin Soltani, Annika Ganzeveld and Andie Parry

July 26, 2023

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Key Takeaways

- 1 An Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force (IRGC QF) commander, Iranian security officials, and Hamas leadership discussed capitalizing on Israeli unrest in a three-hour meeting in mid-July, according to an Iranian diplomat and a Hamas source who spoke with *Reuters*.
- 2 Bolivian Defense Minister Edmundo Novillo Aguilar expressed interest in purchasing Iranian drones on July 25. CTP previously assessed that Iran may seek to sell drones to Bolivia as part of a memorandum of understanding (MoU) that the two signed on July 20.
- 3 The Raisi administration seeks to bolster electricity cooperation with Russia. Connecting Iran's electricity grid to Russia's could increase domestic stability in Iran.
- 4 Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Secretary Rear Admiral Ali Akbar Ahmadian met with newly-appointed Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on the sidelines of a Friends of BRICS National Security Advisors meeting in Johannesburg, South Africa on July 24.



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4. JOHANNESBURG - Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Secretary Rear Admiral Ali Akbar Ahmadian met with newly-appointed Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on the sidelines of a Friends of BRICS National Security Advisors meeting in Johannesburg, South Africa on July 24.

Iranian Activities in the Levant

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An Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force (IRGC QF) commander, Iranian security officials, and Hamas leadership discussed capitalizing on Israeli unrest in a three-hour meeting in mid-July, according to an Iranian diplomat and a Hamas source who spoke with Reuters.^[i] The leaders decided to refrain from "direct interference" in Israel's social unrest. Axis of Resistance leadership and media have devoted considerable attention to the judicial reform protests in Israel. IRGC-affiliated *Tasnim News Agency* recirculated former Israeli officials' comments on a coming civil war and the disintegration of Israeli society in the past week.^[ii] Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) leader Hassan Nasrallah claimed Israel was on a path of collapse and fragmentation on July 24, referring to Israeli judicial reform.^[iii]

CTP is considering several hypotheses for how Iran and the Axis of Resistance may capitalize on internal Israeli unrest.

Iran may give priority to rebuilding capabilities in the West Bank. CTP previously assessed Iran would likely help Palestinian militants rebuild the military capabilities the Israel Defense Forces degraded during a July 2023 raid in Jenin.^[iv] Iranian leaders have stressed the importance of cultivating an armed resistance in the West Bank.^[v]

Iran may build up weapon stockpiles in Syria. Iran may have used Israeli preoccupation with domestic and Palestine issues to move advanced weaponry through eastern Syria and avoid Israeli targeting in May 2023.^[vi] Israel targeted weapons sites in Damascus in an airstrike on July 18 amid domestic unrest, however.^[vii] Israel has long sought to prevent the Iranian transfer of personnel and weapons into Syria.

Iran may not take provocative actions. Iranian leadership may calculate ongoing Israeli unrest will be more disruptive for Israel than any direct Iranian action. LH-affiliated media *Al Manar* has repeatedly published that political and military divisions in Israel benefit Axis of Resistance objectives.^[viii]

Iranian Domestic and Political Affairs

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Bolivian Defense Minister Edmundo Novillo Aguilar expressed interest in purchasing Iranian drones on July 25.^[ix] CTP previously assessed that Iran may seek to sell drones to Bolivia as part of a memorandum of understanding (MoU) that the two signed on July 20.^[x] Novillo stated on July 25 that Iranian drones would help Bolivia monitor mountainous areas and secure its borders against drug traffickers.^[xi] Ashtiani stated on July 19 that Iran's defense industry can provide Bolivia with "advanced technology" and separately stated on July 20 that Iran can help Bolivia with "border control" and "confronting drug smuggling."^[xii] Drones are frequently used to bolster border security and combat smuggling.

The MOU is consistent with Iran's explicitly stated policy in recent years to increase the number of countries that buy Iranian drones. Supreme Leader Military Affairs Advisor and former IRGC Commander Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi boasted in October 2022 that 22 countries—including Algeria, Armenia, Serbia, Tajikistan, and Venezuela—had submitted formal requests for Iranian drones.^[xiii] President Ebrahim Raisi additionally promoted Iranian drone technology during several recent foreign trips, including during his most recent trip to Kenya, Uganda, and Zimbabwe between July 12-14.^[xiv] Iranian media and officials have previously highlighted the desire of other African countries, including Ethiopia, to purchase Iranian-made drones.^[xv] Iran has, furthermore, established drone manufacturing factories in Tajikistan and Venezuela and is building another in Yelabuga, Russia.^[xvi]

The MOU is also consistent with CTP's previous assessment that Iran is seeking to increase defense exports to generate revenue for the Iranian economy.^[xvii] Armed Forces General Staff Chief Major General Mohammad Bagheri emphasized on May 31 that Iran will export its military capabilities to "friendly" countries.^[xviii] Bagheri also called on Foreign Affairs Ministry officials to relay Iran's willingness to export its defense capabilities to foreign dignitaries on May 30.^[xix] Defense Minister Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Ashtiani separately expressed Iran's willingness to supply Mali with military equipment and small arms on May 29 and offered to sell arms to and help develop Syria's defense industry on May 8 and 10.^[xx] Iran is currently facing critical economic conditions, with the value of the rial hovering slightly below 500,000 rials to one US dollar.^[xxi] Iranian media, citing the Iran Statistical Center, reported on July 25 that Iran's inflation rate is approximately 47.5 percent.^[xxii]

The Raisi administration seeks to bolster electricity cooperation with Russia. Iranian Energy Minister Ali Akbar Mehrabian announced on July 16 that Iran is in "final negotiations" to conduct electricity exchanges with Russia via two routes, one via Azerbaijan and the other via Armenia and Georgia.^[xxiii] Iranian officials have discussed connecting Iran's electricity grid to Russia's for several years, making it unclear whether Mehrabian's announcement indicates real progress on this project.^[xxiv] Unspecified senior Iranian Energy Ministry officials separately discussed bilateral electricity cooperation with managers of Russian power company Rosseti in Tehran on July 26.^[xxv] Iran currently exchanges electricity with Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Iraq, Pakistan, Turkey, and Turkmenistan.^[xxvi]

Connecting Iran's electricity grid to Russia's could increase domestic stability in Iran. Mehrabian stated that Iranians use more electricity in the summer while Russians use more electricity in the winter and that therefore Iran can export electricity to Russia in the winter and import electricity from Russia in the summer.^[xxvii] Power outages during a heatwave previously triggered protests throughout Iran in June 2021.^[xxviii] Several Iranian cities have experienced temperatures greater than 115 degrees Fahrenheit in recent weeks.^[xxix] Iranian authorities have additionally shut down numerous offices across Iran for consuming "too much" electricity in recent weeks.^[xxx]

Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Secretary Rear Admiral Ali Akbar Ahmadian met with newly-appointed Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on the sidelines of a Friends of BRICS National Security Advisors meeting in Johannesburg, South Africa on July 24.^[xxxi] Ahmadian and Wang Yi discussed Chinese transportation investments and China's support for Iranian territorial integrity. This meeting is part of Iran's broader efforts to establish a parallel world order with other revisionist states that challenges Western "dominance."^[xxxii] Iran recently became a member of the Chinese and Russian-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) on July 4.^[xxxiii] Iranian media framed Iran's accession into the organization as part of "the transformation of the world order."^[xxxiv] CTP previously assessed that Iran's membership in this organization may enable it to circumvent sanctions by conducting non-US dollar financial transactions with other SCO countries.^[xxxv] Iranian officials have additionally expressed support for Chinese regional infrastructure projects and sought to attract Chinese infrastructure investments in recent weeks.^[xxxvi]

[View Citations](#)



Iran Update, June 9, 2023

By Andie Parry, Ashka Jhaveri, Johanna Moore, Amin Soltani, Annika Ganzeveld and Nicholas Carl June 09, 2023

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Key Takeaways

- 1 Iran is establishing military storage facilities in eastern Syria, likely to facilitate Iranian weapons transfers and military entrenchment along a critical transportation route into the country. These construction projects are part of a larger Iranian effort to build military infrastructure throughout Deir ez Zor Province.
- 2 The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) published its quarterly safeguards, verification and monitoring reports on the Iranian nuclear program on June 8, detailing significant Iranian nuclear advancements. The IAEA reports furthermore demonstrate that Iran has not resolved any of the agency's inquiries into undeclared nuclear activities—contrary to recent Western media reports.
- 3 The Biden administration revealed on June 9 that Iran is helping Russia build a drone manufacturing factory in Yelabuga, Tatarstan, Russia, which underscores the growing military cooperation between Tehran and Moscow despite Western sanctions.
- 4 Iranian news outlets published the finalized version of the Judiciary's Chastity and Hijab Bill on June 8. This bill demonstrates the regime's uncompromising stance on women's rights issues and continued refusal to grant sociocultural concessions in the aftermath of the Mahsa Amini movement.

Iran Update | June 9, 2023



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Iran is establishing military storage facilities in eastern Syria, likely to facilitate Iranian weapons transfers and military entrenchment along a critical transportation route into the country. A senior Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) official in al Mayadin ordered Lebanese Hezbollah-run, US-sanctioned construction company Jihad al Binaa to excavate land for weapons warehouses and tunnels in eastern al Mayadin, according to local anti-Iranian outlet *Eye of Euphrates* on June 8.^[i] Separately, Iranian-backed militants transported a large construction crane to dig tunnels and build warehouses near the Ain Ali Shrine in the southern outskirts of al Mayadin on May 31.^[ii] These construction projects are part of a larger Iranian effort to build military infrastructure throughout Deir ez Zor Province. CTP previously reported Jihad al Binaa and the IRGC built a barracks, weapons storage facility, training camp, and dozens of houses for families of Iranian-affiliated militants in Deir ez Zor City on May 19.^[iii] Iran stores advanced weapons in underground sites to protect the materiel from detection and destruction, especially from Israeli airstrikes, indicating Iran intends to build up an advanced weapons stockpile in al Mayadin.^[iv] Iranian-backed militias have previously targeted US forces from al Mayadin.^[v]

CTP presents here an updated graphic illustrating the observed and unobserved indicators that we are using to understand whether Iran will resume its attack campaigns in Iraq and Syria to expel US forces. We will update and refine this list and our related assessments in future updates.

IRAN: INDICATORS OF AN ATTACK ON US FORCES



CTP and ISW have observed and reported various indications that Iran is setting conditions to resume attacks on US forces in Iraq and Syria. The following revised chart shows how those indicators differ between Iraq and Syria.

Activity Type	Indicators	Observed in Iraq	Observed in Syria
Command	• Supreme leader approved an attack on US forces	N	N
	• IRGC-QF ordered an attack on US forces	N	N
	• Militia(s) indicated willingness to follow Iranian orders to attack US forces	Y	N
Planning	• Iran and/or militias monitor US force movements and facilities	N	Y
	• Iran and/or militias have set campaign plans	Y	N
	• Iran and/or militias have completed operational planning	N	N
	• Iran and/or militias are preparing to defend against US retaliation	N	Y

Information Operations	• Iran warned of an attack on US forces	N	Y
	• Militias warned of an attack on US forces	Y	Y
	• Iran and/or militias are coordinating attack threat messaging	Y	Y
Weapons	• Iran provided weapons to militias for attacks on US forces	Y	Y
	• Militias have deployed weapons to attack US forces	N	Y
	• Militias have trained to use weapons to attack US forces	N	Y

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CTP modified this list of indicators to refine our efforts to forecast whether Iran will direct an attack on US forces in Iraq and Syria. We removed indicators related to new military infrastructure, weapons shipments, and IRGC Quds Force operations in Iraq and Syria because these phenomena are not solely indicative of an impending campaign to target US forces. Iran is pursuing multiple strategic and operational objectives in Iraq and Syria through human networks and with military infrastructure that it has developed over time and under multiple campaigns. CTP can therefore not determine whether new military infrastructure, arms transfers, or IRGC Quds Force deployments are meant for an Iranian campaign to expel US forces from Iraq and Syria.

CTP is unlikely to observe some of the indicators in the open-source environment, such as Iran’s supreme leader approving attacks and the IRGC Quds Force commander ordering Iranian-backed militias to conduct the attacks. It would also be abnormal for Iraqi outlets to cover Iranian-backed proxies receiving arms from Iran or deploying those weapons for use against US forces.

CTP cannot currently determine which proxy groups Iran would direct to attack US forces. The list of indicators is designed to assess whether Iran and its proxies have set the conditions needed to begin an attack campaign against US forces from Iraq and Syria. This list does not determine which proxies Iran would direct to carry out attacks or which militias might conduct attacks of their own volition. Iranian-backed proxies employ façade groups to obfuscate their involvement in attacks. It is also unclear which of the groups that have announced plans to attack US forces intend to follow through on their threats. Uniform messaging across Iranian-backed proxies supports CTP's assessment that Iran intends to pursue this campaign, but proxies do not consistently follow through on threats to US forces.

Iranian Domestic Affairs

This section covers factors and trends affecting regime decision-making and stability. CTP will cover domestic politics, significant protest activity, and related issues here.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) published its quarterly safeguards, verification and monitoring reports on the Iranian nuclear program on June 8, which detail significant Iranian nuclear advancements. Iran has accumulated 114.1 kilograms of 60-percent enriched uranium—more than quadruple the amount that the IAEA considers a “significant quantity” of highly enriched uranium needed to produce a single compact nuclear explosive.^[vi] Iran's total stockpile of enriched uranium is over 14 times the permitted limit of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.^[vii] Iran could enrich one bomb's worth of weapons-grade uranium in 12 days and eight bombs' worth in three months given its current stockpile and number of operating advanced centrifuges.

The IAEA reports furthermore demonstrate that Iran has not resolved any of the agency's inquiries into undeclared nuclear activities—contrary to recent Western media reports. Iran provided information for its claim that the near weapons-grade uranium discovered at the Fordow enrichment facility in January 2023 was due to an unintended fluctuation in enrichment levels.^[viii] The IAEA assessed that the information was “not inconsistent” with Iran's explanation. The agency typically uses that language when it is unpersuaded and plans on further pursuing its investigation.^[ix] The agency also stated that Iran provided one “possible explanation” for the discovery of enriched uranium traces at the undeclared Marivan site, meaning that the agency could not verify Iran's explanation and will consider alternatives over time.^[x] Western and Iranian media incorrectly reported that Iran had resolved both of the above inquiries.^[xi] Iran also did not provide a satisfactory explanation for the discrepancy in its natural uranium inventory at the conversion facility in Esfahan.^[xii] Iran could have been trying to conceal nuclear weapons-related activities by mixing diverted natural uranium back into its Esfahan inventory.^[xiii] Iran has also not provided any explanations for the outstanding safeguards issues surrounding the Turqzabad and Varamin sites.^[xiv]

The Biden administration revealed on June 9 that Iran is helping Russia build a drone manufacturing factory in Yelabuga, Tatarstan, Russia, which underscores the growing military cooperation between Tehran and Moscow despite Western sanctions.^[xv] National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby stated on June 9 that the drone factory—which the *Wall Street Journal* reported in February 2023 could produce at least 6,000 Iranian Shahed-136 drones—could be operational by early 2024.^[xvi] Kirby previously announced on May 15 that Russia is seeking to purchase new drones from Iran after expending most of its Iranian drone supply.^[xvii] A factory producing Iranian drones in Russia would support Russia's war effort against Ukraine. Russia could provide Iran with advanced military equipment that would help modernize Iran's armed forces, such as Su-35 fighter jets, attack helicopters, radars, and YAK-130 combat trainer aircraft, in return for helping construct the factory.

Iranian news outlets published the finalized version of the Judiciary's Chastity and Hijab Bill on June 8. This bill demonstrates the regime's uncompromising stance on women's rights issues and continued refusal to grant sociocultural concessions in the aftermath of the Mahsa Amini movement. The Raisi administration approved this bill drafted by the Judiciary outlining the regime's hijab enforcement policy on May 21.^[xviii] Parliamentarians are currently reviewing the bill, although it is unclear when they will vote on it. The bill outlines numerous legal punishments for noncompliance with the hijab law, including fines, salary cuts, deprivation of “social rights,” and referral to judicial authorities.^[xix] The bill additionally stipulates that Iranian authorities can shut down public places—such as stores and restaurants—where mandatory veiling is not observed. CTP has previously observed Iranian authorities using and threatening such punishments to compel compliance with the hijab law.^[xx] The provisions of the new Chastity and Hijab Bill are thus not new but demonstrate the regime's resolve to crack down—as opposed to compromise—on sociocultural issues following the Mahsa Amini movement.

[View Citations](#)



Iran Update, June 8, 2023

By Ashka Jhaveri, Andie Parry, Johanna Moore and Nicholas Carl

June 08, 2023

The Iran Update aims to inform national security policy by providing timely, relevant, and independent open-source analysis of developments pertaining to Iran and its Axis of Resistance. This update covers political, military, and economic events and trends that affect the stability and decision-making of the Iranian regime. It also provides insights into Iranian and Iranian-sponsored activities abroad that undermine regional stability and threaten US forces and interests. The Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute with support from the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) provides these updates Monday through Friday. To receive Iran Updates via email, please subscribe [here](#).

The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) with support from the Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute is launching a new interactive map of Iran and the Middle East. The map depicts events in Iran that affect the stability of the Iranian regime, namely anti-regime protests and reported poisoning incidents. It also shows developments in Syria that jeopardize regional stability and pose threats to US forces and interests, including Iranian and Iranian-backed militia positions.

Key Takeaways

1. An IRGC Quds Force-affiliated recruitment center in Deir ez Zor City is recruiting Syrians for counter-US operations in Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) territory. This reporting supports CTP's assessment that Iran may be preparing to direct proxy attacks against US forces in Syria.
2. CTP previously reported that Iranian and Russian military officials met to discuss expelling the United States from Syria, which may indicate Russia's intent to facilitate Iranian-backed attacks on US forces. CTP is considering several hypotheses about how Russia would interact with an Iranian-backed campaign against US forces in Syria.



- 1). DEIR EZ ZOR - An IRGC Quds Force-affiliated recruitment center in Deir ez Zor City is recruiting Syrians for counter-US operations in Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) territory. This reporting supports CTP's assessment that Iran may be preparing to direct proxy attacks against US forces in Syria.
- 2). SYRIA - CTP previously reported that Iranian and Russian military officials met to discuss expelling the United States from Syria, which may indicate Russia's intent to facilitate Iranian-backed attacks on US forces. CTP is considering several hypotheses about how Russia would interact with an Iranian-backed campaign against US forces in Syria.

Iranian Activities in the Levant

This section covers Iranian efforts to consolidate and expand Tehran's economic, military, and political influence throughout the Levant and especially in Syria. This section examines some of the many campaigns that Iran is pursuing to achieve this strategic objective. CTP will update and refine our assessments of these campaigns over time and in future updates.

An IRGC Quds Force-affiliated recruitment center in Deir ez Zor City is recruiting Syrians for counter-US operations in Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) territory. This reporting supports CTP's assessment that Iran may be preparing to direct proxy attacks against US forces in Syria. The head of the Iranian Nasr Center in Deir ez Zor City asked local militia leaders to recruit informants to collect intelligence on US forces and SDF leaders on June 8, according to local anti-Syrian regime outlet *Eye of Euphrates*.^[i] He also indicated that the recruits would conduct unspecified military operations against US and SDF forces.^[ii] The Nasr Center is offering new recruits between 700,000 and one million Syrian Pounds (SYPs).^[iii] CTP previously reported on an Iranian-backed Syrian militia leader offering 300,000 SYPs to locals in Deir ez Zor Province to target US patrols with improvised explosive devices (IEDs).^[iv]

This reporting is consistent with previous reports that Iranian and Iranian-backed leaders have trained local Syrians to attack US forces with IEDs and explosively formed penetrators (EFPs).^[v] High-ranking Iranian officials frequent the Nasr Center for meetings, which indicates that it is linked to the Iranian regime and IRGC. IRGC Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani visited the center in 2021, for instance.^[vi]

CTP previously reported that Iranian and Russian military officials met to discuss expelling the United States from Syria, which may indicate Russia's intent to facilitate Iranian-backed attacks on US forces.^[vii] CTP is considering several hypotheses about how Russia would interact with an Iranian-backed campaign against US forces in Syria. The hypotheses are listed in order of least to greatest Russian involvement in the campaign. The list does not, however, cover all the potential avenues for Russo-Iranian cooperation against the United States in Syria.

- 1 **Russia withholds support for Iranian-backed attacks on US forces.** Russia would either play no role in an Iranian attack campaign or only conduct information operations to support Iran. The latter could include statements and media that frame the US military presence in Syria as permanent and expanding or condemn the presence of US forces in Syria. This is plausible given Russian information operations to date. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, for example, claimed that the United States would create a new Free Syrian Army in Raqqa Province on May 10.^[viii] Avoiding direct support for Iran while propagating information operations would present the least risk of escalation between the United States and Russia in Syria.
- 2 **Iran and Russia coordinate on when and where Iranian-backed forces attack, but Russia does not directly support them.** Iran and Russia agreed to establish a coordination center in Syria in November 2022 to coordinate efforts to attack Americans in eastern and northeastern Syria.^[ix] Russia could use such coordination mechanisms to ensure its forces are not collocated with Iranian forces or Iranian-backed militias. Keeping Russian forces out of a conflict between the United States and Iran would reduce the risk of a confrontation between the United States and Russia.
- 3 **Iran and Russia share intelligence to support Iranian-backed attacks on US forces.** Iran and Russia previously shared intelligence during the fight against ISIS in 2015, which demonstrates there is a precedent for intelligence sharing.^[x] Jusoor Studies—a Syria-focused think tank based in Turkey—recirculated reports that Russia assisted Iran in targeting US forces by sharing intelligence during the most recent March 2023 escalation cycle.^[xi] CTP is unable to verify the claims Jusoor cites. Russian intelligence sharing with Iran would present a low risk of Russia getting involved in an escalation cycle while potentially making Iranian attacks more deadly for US forces.

CTP presents here an updated graphic illustrating the observed and unobserved indicators that we are using to understand whether Iran will resume its attack campaigns in Iraq and Syria to expel US forces. We will update and refine this list and our related assessments in future updates.

IRAN: INDICATORS OF AN ATTACK ON US FORCES



CTP and ISW have observed and reported various indications that Iran is setting conditions to resume attacks on US forces in Iraq and Syria. The following revised chart shows how those indicators differ between Iraq and Syria.

Activity Type	Indicators	Observed in Iraq	Observed in Syria
Command	• Supreme leader approved an attack on US forces	N	N
	• IRGC-QF ordered an attack on US forces	N	N
	• Militia(s) indicated willingness to follow Iranian orders to attack US forces	Y	N
Planning	• Iran and/or militias monitor US force movements and facilities	N	Y
	• Iran and/or militias have set campaign plans	Y	N
	• Iran and/or militias have completed operational planning	N	N
	• Iran and/or militias are preparing to defend against US retaliation	N	Y

Information Operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Iran warned of an attack on US forces 	N	Y
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Militias warned of an attack on US forces 	Y	Y
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Iran and/or militias are coordinating attack threat messaging 	Y	Y
Weapons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Iran provided weapons to militias for attacks on US forces 	Y	Y
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Militias have deployed weapons to attack US forces 	N	Y
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Militias have trained to use weapons to attack US forces 	N	Y

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Iran Update, June 7, 2023

By Andie Parry, Annika Ganzeveld and Nicholas Carl

June 07, 2023

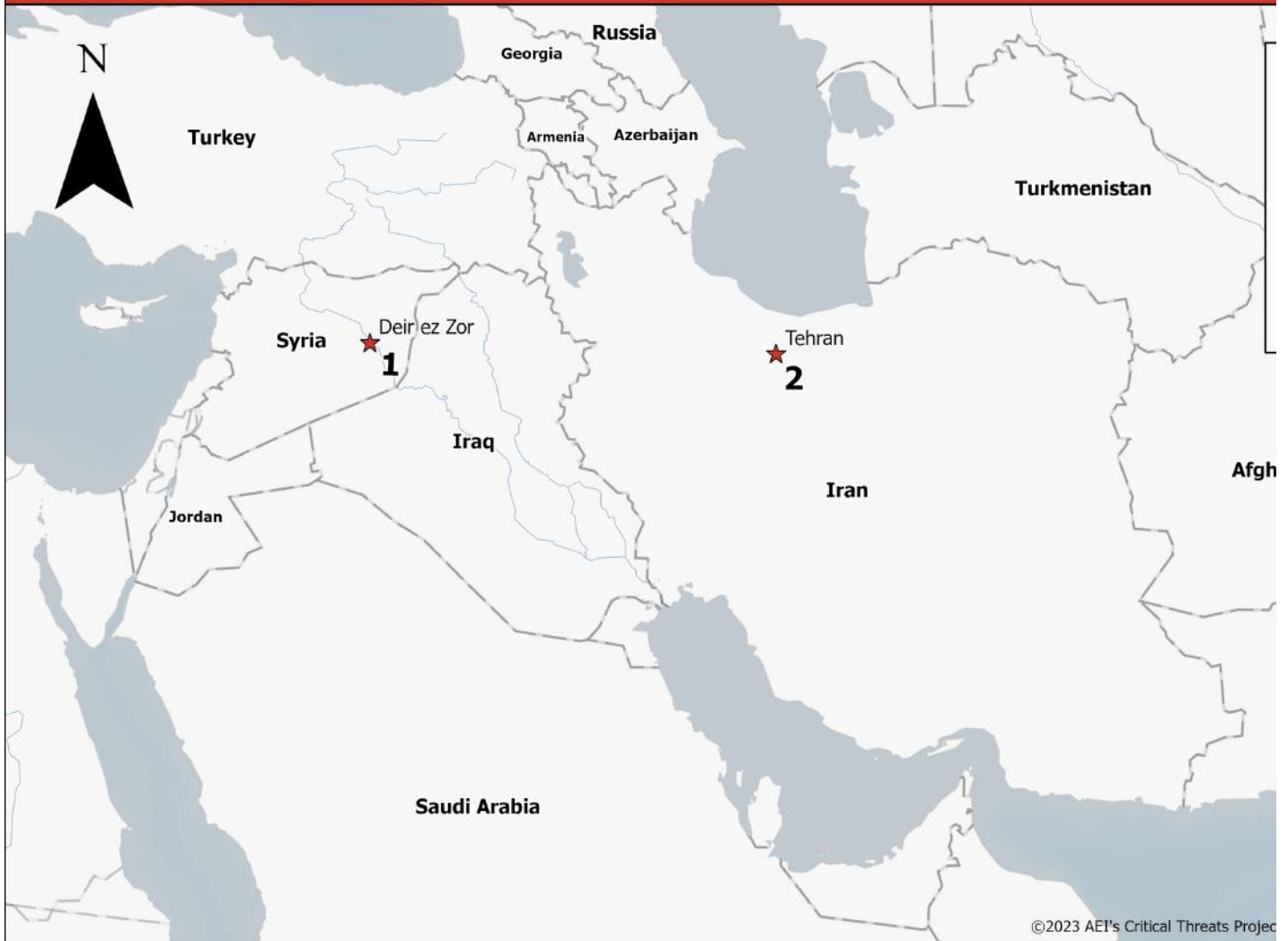
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Key Takeaways

1. Iranian and Russian military officials met to discuss expelling the United States from Syria, which may indicate Russia's intent to help facilitate Iranian-backed attacks against US forces.
2. Iran's Parliamentary Internal Affairs Committee has proposed amending the parliamentary election law, which will likely empower hardliners to retain power in the March 2024 parliamentary election. The proposed election law amendments could decrease public faith in Iran's electoral process and reduce voter participation in the March 2024 parliamentary election.

Iran Update | June 7, 2023



- 1). DEIR EZ ZOR - Iranian and Russian military officials met to discuss expelling the United States from Syria, which may indicate facilitate Iranian-backed attacks against US forces.
- 2). TEHRAN - Iran's Parliamentary Internal Affairs Committee has proposed amending the parliamentary election law, which will retain power in the March 2024 parliamentary election. The proposed election law amendments could decrease public faith in Iran reduce voter participation in the March 2024 parliamentary election.

Iranian Activities in the Levant

This section covers Iranian efforts to consolidate and expand Tehran's economic, military, and political influence throughout the Levant and especially in Syria. This section examines some of the many campaigns that Iran is pursuing to achieve this strategic objective. CTP will update and refine our assessments of these campaigns over time and in future updates.

Iranian and Russian military officials met to discuss expelling the United States from Syria, which may indicate Russia's intent to help facilitate Iranian-backed attacks against US forces. IRGC Quds Force and Russian military officials met in Deir ez Zor City to discuss coordinating attacks against US forces in Syria on June 6, according to local anti-Iranian outlet *Eye of Euphrates*.^[i] CTP previously assessed that Iranian leaders are preparing to resume their campaign to expel US forces from the Middle East by attacking and killing US service members.^[ii] CTP cannot independently verify the details of the meeting in Deir ez Zor City. The reporting is, however, consistent with an article from the *Washington Post* that Iran and Russia formed a joint coordination center in Syria to expel US forces from Syria in November 2022.^[iii]

Iranian Domestic Affairs

This section covers factors and trends affecting regime decision-making and stability. CTP will cover domestic politics, significant protest activity, and related issues here.

Iran's Parliamentary Internal Affairs Committee has proposed amending the parliamentary election law, which will likely empower hardliners to retain power in the March 2024 parliamentary election. Parliamentarians from across the political spectrum have reported that the election law amendments would increase the ultra-hardline Guardian Council's authority to influence elections.^[iv] The Guardian Council is a regime body responsible for vetting parliamentary and presidential candidates. It has routinely barred moderate and reformist politicians from competing in elections. In 2020, for example, the Guardian Council barred approximately 50 percent of the candidates—mostly reformists and moderates—from competing in parliamentary elections. These disqualifications granted the regime hardliners a significant advantage.^[v]

Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi stated on June 5 that Parliament approved the proposed amendments.^[vi] The Expediency Discernment Council is currently reviewing the amendments' "contradictions with the regime's general policies," however.^[vii] These amendments signal Parliament's continuing unwillingness to grant the Iranian people political concessions following the Mahsa Amini movement. The head of the committee that proposed these amendments—former Student Basij Commander and IRGC Legal and Parliamentary Deputy Mohammad Saleh Jokar—was previously sanctioned by the European Union for suppressing free speech and dissent. ^[viii]

The proposed election law amendments could decrease public faith in Iran's electoral process and reduce voter participation in the March 2024 parliamentary election. The Interior Ministry reported that voter turnout in Iran's 2020 parliamentary elections fell to 42.57 percent, the lowest turnout in Iran's history.^[ix] Hardline Parliamentarian Ahmad Ali Reza Beygi stated on May 31 that the proposed election law amendments would grant the Guardian Council the authority to disqualify candidates after winning an election.^[x] Jihadgaran Party Secretary General Wahab Azizi similarly lamented on June 5 that the proposed election law amendments aim to prevent "unaligned political currents" from entering Parliament.^[xi] Strengthening the Guardian Council's ability to influence elections would decrease the significance of citizens' votes.

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Iran Update, June 6, 2023

By Andie Parry, Johanna Moore, Ashka Jhaveri and Nicholas Carl

June 06, 2023

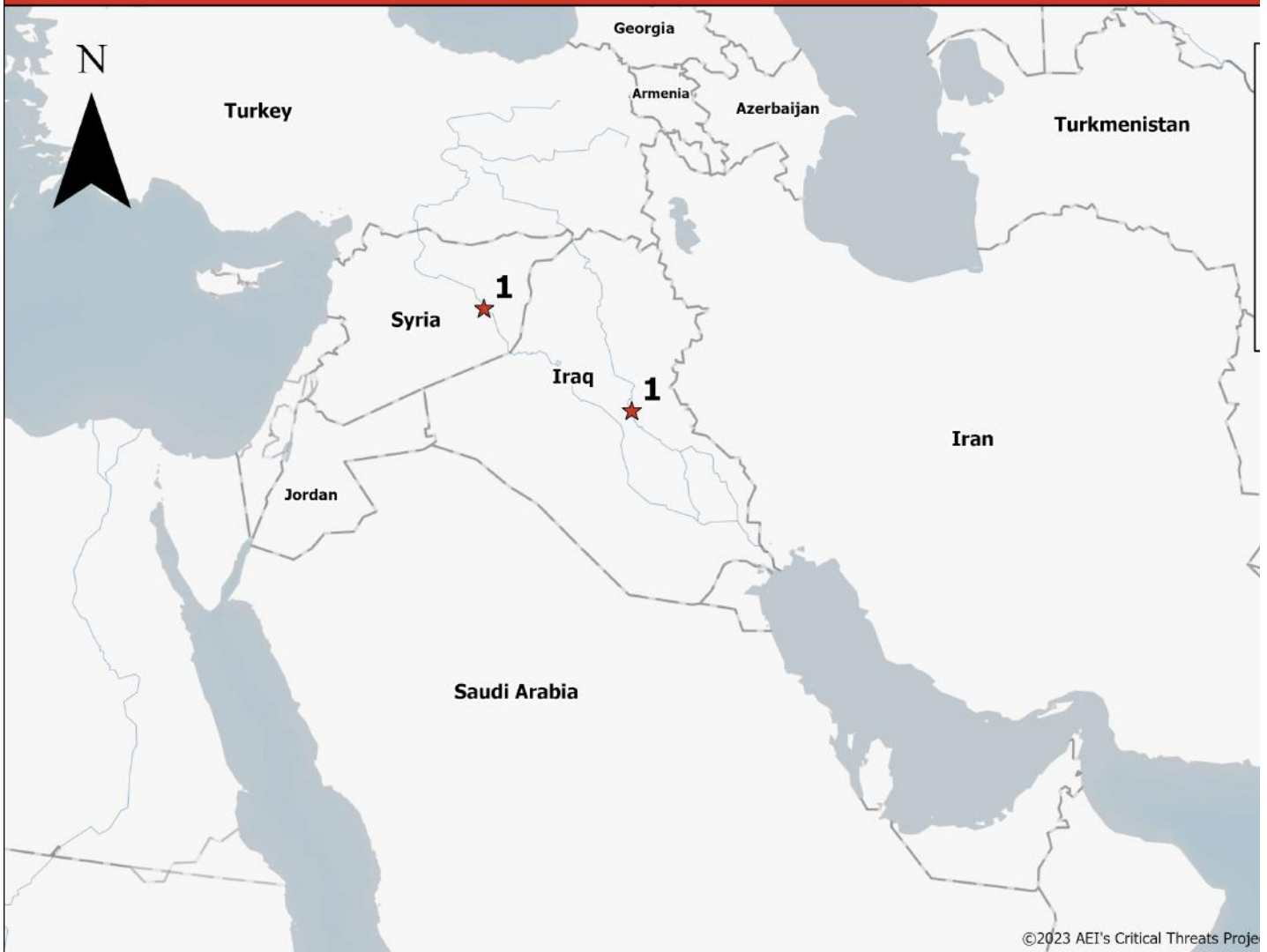
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Key Takeaway

- 1 Iranian leaders are preparing to resume their campaign to expel US forces from the Middle East by attacking and killing US service members after pausing this campaign in mid-2021. Iran will need to meet several operational conditions to conduct an attack on US forces in Iraq and Syria.

Iran Update | June 6, 2023



1). SYRIA and IRAQ - Iranian leaders are preparing to resume their campaign to expel US Middle East by attacking and killing US service members after pausing this campaign in mid-2021 to meet several operational conditions to conduct an attack on US forces in Iraq and

Iranian Activities in the Levant

This section covers Iranian efforts to consolidate and expand Tehran's economic, military, and political influence throughout the Levant and especially in Syria. This section examines some of the many campaigns that Iran is pursuing to achieve this strategic objective. CTP will update and refine our assessments of these campaigns over time and in future updates.

Iranian leaders are preparing to resume their campaign to expel US forces from the Middle East by attacking and killing US service members after pausing this campaign in mid-2021. Iranian-backed militias conducted a series of drone and rocket attacks against US forces in Iraq and Syria from January 2020 to July 2021 to coerce US leaders to withdraw forces from these countries.^[i] Iranian leaders have operated on the theory that low levels of military pressure on US forces will gradually erode political will in Washington to sustain these deployments. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 likely reinforced this long-standing Iranian expectation. Iran paused this campaign around July 2021 to give priority to consolidating its political position in Iraq as the Iraqi legislative elections occurred in October 2021 and the Iraqi Parliament confirmed its new prime minister—Mohammad Shia al Sudani—in October 2022.^[ii] Iranian-backed militias continued to conduct infrequent attacks while Iran paused its attack campaign against the United States.

CTP and ISW have observed and reported various indications that Iran is trying to set conditions to resume attacks on US forces in Iraq and Syria. The following chart shows how those indicators differ between Iraq and Syria.

IRAN: INDICATORS OF AN ATTACK ON US FORCES



CTP and ISW have observed and reported various indications that Iran is setting conditions to resume attacks on US forces in Iraq and Syria. The following chart shows how those indicators differ between Iraq and Syria.

Activity Type	Indicators	Observed in Iraq	Observed in Syria
Personnel	• IRGC-QF in country [1]	Y	Y
	• Militia deployments [2]	Y	Y
	• Iran and militias recruiting local fighters [3]	<u>N</u>	Y
	• Militia training for attacks [4]	<u>N</u>	Y
Command	• Iran ordered attacks	<u>N</u>	<u>N</u>
	• Iran and militias have planned attacks [5]	<u>N</u>	Y
Infrastructure	• Iranian and/or militia barracks in country [6]	Y	Y
	• Iran and/or militias secured transportation routes into the country [7]	Y	Y
	• Iran and/or militias have weapon storage sites in the country [8]	Y	Y
Weapons	• Iran transfers weapons to militias [9]	Y	Y
	• Iran provides weapon training [10]	<u>N</u>	Y
Information Operations	• Iran warning of attack [11]	<u>N</u>	Y
	• Iran and/or militias coordinate messaging about US threat [12]	Y	Y
	• Militia warning of attack [13]	Y	Y

Sources^[iii]

Iran will need to meet several operational conditions to conduct an attack on US forces in Syria and Iraq. CTP has observed indicators that Iran has met many of those conditions or is working toward meeting them. Iran must reinforce its personnel, command, infrastructure, materiel, and information operations in Syria to launch a sustained campaign against the United States that maintains Iranian strategic depth.

Iranian-backed militias and proxies in Iraq operate in a fundamentally different environment than those in Syria, which requires them to meet different operational requirements prior to conducting an attack on US forces in Iraq. Some Iranian-backed militia leaders in Iraq hold state and non-state roles and have built popularity around an inaccurate narrative that they have provided security since forming a majority coalition in the Iraqi government. These groups need to present a perceived threat to justify kinetic engagements.

Three new Iraqi militias were established in the past week, two of which are suspected of having ties to Iranian proxy Kataib Hezbollah (KH). A series of new Iraqi militias similarly formed after the death of IRGC Quds Force Commander Major General Qassem Soleimani and Deputy Chief of the Popular Mobilization Forces Abu Mahdi al Muhandis. The militias had ties to existing Iranian-backed militias and with the stated purpose of targeting and expelling US forces from Iraq.

CTP is considering two alternate hypotheses to understand how Iran and Iranian-backed militias may conduct attacks on US forces and interests in Iraq and Syria.

- 1 Iran views attacks in Iraq and Syria as complementary and overlapping campaigns that may cross borders.** This hypothesis is plausible because the Iraq-based Iranian proxy group Liwa al Ghaliboun attacked US forces in northeast Syria on March 23, killing a US contractor.^[iv] US forces responded by striking Iranian-affiliated positions in eastern Syria, demonstrating to Iran that the US sought to confine its response to Syria. Iran may use the most recent escalation cycle as an indicator that it can kill Americans and maintain strategic depth.
- 2 Iran views attacks in Iraq and Syria as separate campaigns that may occur in parallel.** Iran would initiate attacks in both countries at different times and may use different groups and tactics to expel US forces. This hypothesis is plausible because the Iraqi militias that have recently threatened to target US personnel warned of attacks only in Iraq.

View Citations



Iran Update, June 5, 2023

By Ashka Jhaveri, Amin Soltani, Johanna Moore, Annika Ganzeveld and Kitaneh Fitzpatrick June 05, 2023

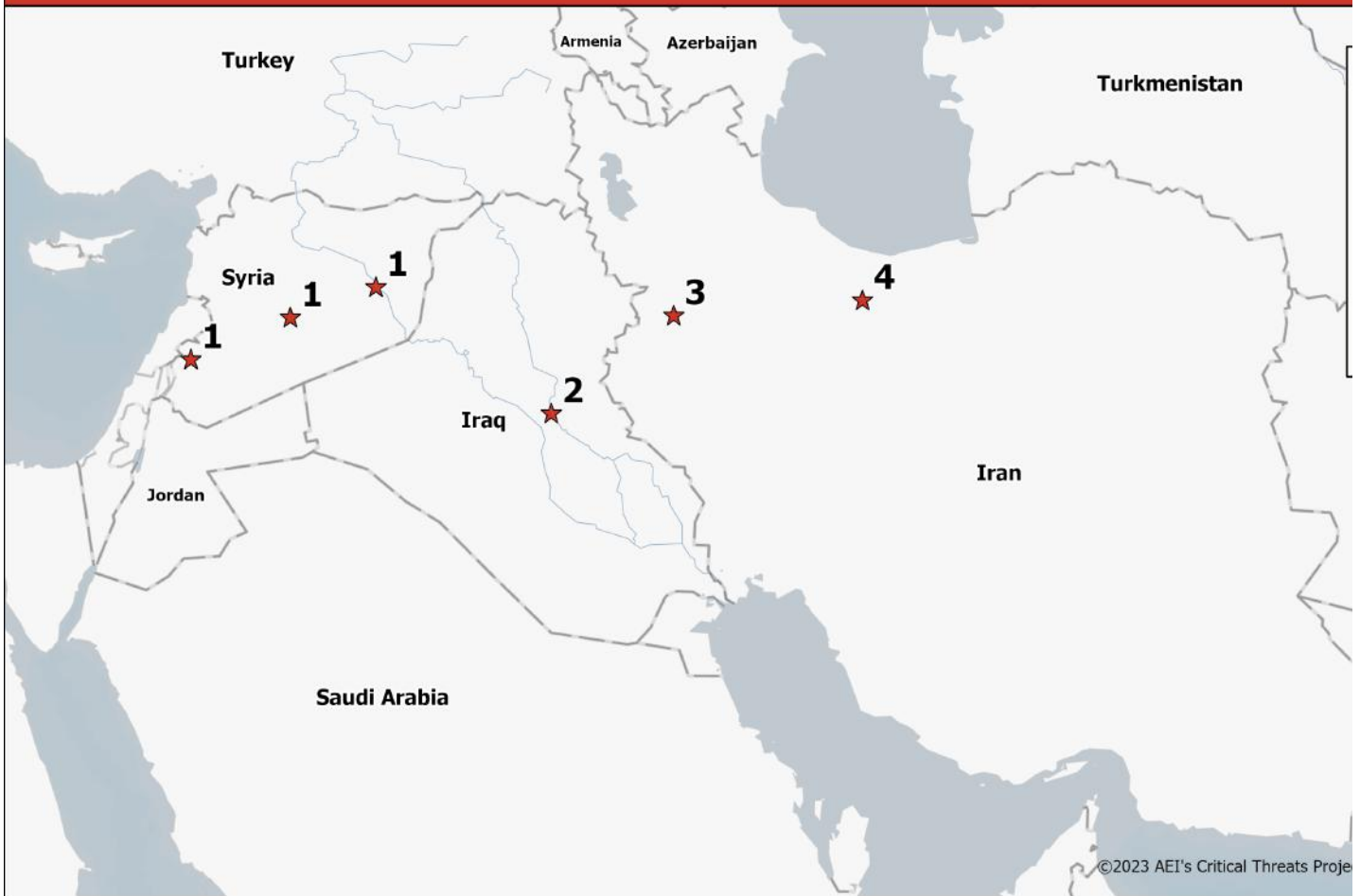
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Key Takeaways

- 1 Iranian leaders in Syria met in Damascus to plan for a potential US attack and recruited locals to target US forces in Deir ez Zor Province with IEDs. This supports CTP's assessment that Iran may be preparing to direct proxy attacks against US forces in Syria.
- 2 A new Iranian-backed militia in Iraq signaled its readiness to attack US forces in Iraq. The Iranian-backed militia Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba (HAN) also plans to attack US forces in Baghdad.
- 3 The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) is continuing to deploy artillery and other materiel to Iran's northwest border with Iraq. This raises CTP's confidence that the IRGC may engage in a short-term military conflict to confront perceived Israeli threats in Iraqi Kurdistan.
- 4 Iran is likely attempting to capitalize on perceived tensions between the United States and the UAE to weaken the US-led multinational maritime security partnership in the Persian Gulf.

Iran Update | June 5, 2023



- 1). DAMASCUS, DEIR EZ ZOR, and HOMS - Iranian leaders in Syria met in Damascus to plan for a potential US attack at US forces in Deir ez Zor Province with IEDs. This supports CTP's assessment that Iran may be preparing to direct proxy attacks in Syria.
- 2). BAGHDAD - A new Iranian-backed militia in Iraq signaled its readiness to attack US forces in Iraq. The Iranian-backed militia al Nujaba (HAN) also plans to attack US forces in Baghdad.
- 3). SANANDAJ- The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) is continuing to deploy artillery and other materiel to Iraq. This raises CTP's confidence that the IRGC may engage in a short-term military conflict to confront perceived Israeli forces in Iraq.
- 4). TEHRAN - Iran is likely attempting to capitalize on perceived tensions between the United States and the UAE to weaken a multinational maritime security partnership in the Persian Gulf.

Iranian Activities in the Levant

This section covers Iranian efforts to consolidate and expand Tehran's economic, military, and political influence throughout the Levant and especially in Syria. This section examines some of the many campaigns that Iran is pursuing to achieve this strategic objective. CTP will update and refine our assessments of these campaigns over time and in future updates.

Iranian leaders in Syria met in Damascus to plan for a potential US attack and recruited locals to target US forces in Deir ez Zor Province with IEDs. This supports CTP's assessment that Iran may be preparing to direct proxy attacks against US forces in Syria. Unspecified Iranian leaders from Deir ez Zor Province met in Damascus City on June 5 to discuss US force movements in Syria and develop plans to repel a potential US attack.^[i] CTP cannot independently verify what the Iranians discussed at the meeting. The United States has attacked Iranian and Iranian-backed forces in Syria in retaliation for attacks on US positions, however. An Iranian-backed Syrian militia leader also recruited locals in Deir ez Zor Province to target US patrols with improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in Syrian Democratic Forces territory, according to local anti-Assad regime media outlet *Nahr Media* on June 3.^[ii] The report comes after the *Washington Post* reported on June 1 that Iran has been training forces to construct and use explosively formed penetrators (EFPs) against US forces in Syria.^[iii] The IRGC Quds Force maintains several command centers and weapons storage installations in the vicinity of Damascus in addition to frequently using it as meeting place to discuss operational developments in Syria, however.^[iv]

Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) Unit 127 drone specialists also conducted a drone exercise for an unspecified delegation in Palmyra, approximately 120 kilometers from the US Al Tanf Garrison, on June 3.[v] Iranian-backed militias have previously conducted intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance flights over US positions and targeted US bases in Syria with attack drones. This suggests the exercise in Palmyra is in preparation to use drones against US forces.[vi]

Iranian Activities in Iraq

This section covers Iranian efforts to consolidate and expand Tehran's economic, military, and political influence throughout Iraq. This section examines some of the many campaigns that Iran is pursuing to achieve this strategic objective. CTP will update and refine our assessments of these campaigns over time and in future updates.

A new Iranian-backed militia in Iraq signaled its readiness to attack US forces in Iraq. Kataib Karbala announced its formation and its intent to target US forces in Iraq on June 3.[vii] This follows the formation of a separate Iranian-backed militia, Kataib al Sabreen, that declared its intent to attack US forces in Iraq on June 1, as CTP previously reported.[viii] Kataib Hezbollah (KH)-backed Telegram channel *Tura News* circulated both announcements, which suggests that the groups may be affiliated with KH.[ix]

The Iranian-backed militia Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba (HAN) also plans to attack US forces in Baghdad, Iraq. HAN announced on May 29 that it redeployed its rocket unit from Mosul to Baghdad to target US forces at Camp Victory and the US Embassy.[x] The move was HAN's response to a statement from the US Ambassador to Iraq Alina Romanowski, who said the United States will target HAN leadership, starting with HAN Secretary General Akram Kaabi, if the group threatens US interests in Iraq.[xi] HAN formed in 2013 as an offshoot from Asaib Ahl al Haq (AAH) and is closely affiliated with the IRGC Quds Force.[xii] Iranian-backed proxies in Iraq derive legitimacy from opposing the US presence in Iraq and amplifying threats from and against the United States in Iraq.

Reported Iranian Deployments | May 30 - June 3



The IRGC is continuing to deploy artillery and other materiel to Iran's northwest border with Iraq. This raises CTP's confidence that the IRGC may engage in a short-term military conflict to confront perceived Israeli threats in Iraqi Kurdistan. Kurdish human rights organization *Hengaw* circulated videos of Iranian forces transporting military equipment to Oshnavieh, West Azerbaijan Province, Sanandaj, Kurdistan Province, and Eslamabad-e Gharb, Kermanshah Province and near Boukan, West Azerbaijan Province on June 3-4.^[xiii]

The Iranian regime is likely attempting to coerce the Iraqi government to confront Kurdish opposition groups, which it accuses of working with Israel to threaten Iran's national security.^[xiv] The recent artillery movements signal Iran's willingness to use military force against Iraq if the Iraqi government does not accede to Iran's demand for increased border security.

Iranian Domestic Affairs

This section covers factors and trends affecting regime decision-making and stability. CTP will cover domestic politics, significant protest activity, and related issues here.

Iran is attempting to capitalize on perceived tensions between the United States and the UAE to weaken the US-led multinational maritime security partnership in the Persian Gulf. Artesh Navy Commander Rear Admiral Shahram Irani stated on June 2 that the regional states will be able to establish security for themselves without the presence of any “unjustified force,” referring to the United States.^[xv] Iranian media also reported on June 2 that China is overseeing negotiations between Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, Iraq, India, and Pakistan to form a joint maritime security force in the Persian Gulf.^[xvi] The Emirati Foreign Affairs Ministry stated on May 31 that the UAE suspended participation in the US-led Combined Maritime Force, a multinational naval partnership dedicated to ensuring freedom of navigation, over two months ago.^[xvii] Iran is undermining security in the Persian Gulf, however. Iran has seized or harassed commercial and naval vessels transiting the Strait of Hormuz over the past month. IRGC fast attack craft, for example, came dangerously close to the Marshall Islands-flagged and Greek managed bulk carrier Venture as it departed from the UAE and transited the Strait of Hormuz as recently as June 5.^[xviii]

Iran is likely mischaracterizing its reports on a regional naval alliance, however. Iranian officials and Iran-affiliated media are the only sources among the other supposed alliance members who have publicly discussed this development. Iranian media and officials have furthermore claimed that Iran is seeking to build a coalition (*etelaaf*), not an alliance (*etehaad*) as some Western outlets have reported, wherein member states would be obligated to mutual defense.^[xix] Iran previously failed to establish maritime security cooperation with the Persian Gulf states when the Rouhani administration proposed it as part of the Hormuz Peace Endeavor in 2019.

[View Citations](#)



Iran Update, June 2, 2023

By Annika Ganzeveld, Andie Parry, Ashka Jhaveri, Johanna Moore and Kitaneh Fitzpatrick
June 02, 2023

The Iran Update aims to inform national security policy by providing timely, relevant, and independent open-source analysis of developments pertaining to Iran and its Axis of Resistance. This update covers political, military, and economic events and trends that affect the stability and decision-making of the Iranian regime. It also provides insights into Iranian and Iranian-sponsored activities abroad that undermine regional stability and threaten US forces and interests. The Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute with support from the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) provides these updates Monday through Friday. To receive Iran Updates via email, please subscribe [here](#).

Key Takeaways

- 1). Iran is training its militias in Syria to use a range of improvised and advanced weapons to attack US personnel in Syria. Iranian-backed militias in Iraq may conduct attacks against US forces in Syria.
- 2). Iran likely calculates that it has achieved strategic depth and using militias in Iraq and Syria to attack US forces will keep conflict confined to Syria.
- 3). Iranian media circulated reports of an IRGC-conducted a drone strike targeting Kurdish Iranian separatist groups in the Iraqi Kurdistan region on June 2.
- 4). The Iranian regime is pursuing increased gas swaps with Turkmenistan, likely to preempt electricity shortages in the summer that could fuel internal unrest.

Iran Update | June 2, 2023



- 1). SYRIA - Iran is training its militias to use a range of improvised and advanced weapons against US forces to attack US personnel, increasing the likelihood of a new round of armed conflict with the United States.
- 2). SYRIA - Iran likely calculates that it has achieved strategic depth and using militias in Iraq and Syria to attack US forces will keep conflict confined to Syria.
- 3). IRAQI KURDISTAN- Iranian media circulated reports of an IRGC-conducted a drone strike targeting Kurdish Iranian separatist groups in the Iraqi Kurdistan region on June 2.
- 4). TEHRAN - The Iranian regime is pursuing increased gas swaps with Turkmenistan, likely to preempt electricity shortages in the summer that could fuel internal unrest.

Iranian Activities in the Levant

This section covers Iranian efforts to consolidate and expand Tehran's economic, military, and political influence throughout the Levant and especially in Syria. This section examines some of the many campaigns that Iran is pursuing to achieve this strategic objective. CTP will update and refine our assessments of these campaigns over time and in future updates.

Iran is training its militias in Syria to use a range of improvised and advanced weapons to attack US personnel in Syria. Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) have trained militias since January to construct and begin using explosively formed penetrators (EFPs) against US forces in Syria.^[i] Iranian-backed militias killed at least 603 US personnel in Iraq with EFPs from 2003 to 2011.^[ii] Iranian Quds Force leaders in Deir ez Zor ordered surface-to-surface missile and man portable air defense system training for a local proxy group in late May.^[iii] CTP cannot independently verify the report about surface-to-surface missiles. Iranian-backed militias also have received training on drones, which enabled them to conduct an ISR flight over the US Conoco Base in Deir ez Zor Province in February and target other US bases in Syria with attack UAVs.^[iv] Iranian-backed militias have also accelerated the training and use of drone capabilities in Deir ez Zor Province since April.^[v] These capabilities enable Iranian-backed militias to carry out attacks on US bases, ground forces, and helicopters in Syria. ^[vi] That the SDF seized three EFPs near a US base in northeast Syria indicates the imminent threat that Iranian proxies armed with EFPs pose to US forces.^[vii]

Iranian-backed militias in Iraq may conduct attacks against US forces in Syria. The Iranian-backed militia Kataib al Sabreen announced its formation and intention to target US forces in Iraq on June 1.^[viii] The Asaib Ahl al Haq and Harakat al Nujaba-affiliated group Ashab al Kahf announced it has ordered its rocket unit operating in Mosul to redeploy to Baghdad to attack US forces at Camp Victory and the US Embassy.^[ix] The Iraq-based Iranian proxy group Liwa al Ghaliboun killed a US contractor in an attack on US forces in Syria on March 23.^[x]

Iran likely calculates that it has achieved strategic depth and using militias in Iraq and Syria to attack US forces will keep conflict confined to Syria. Iranian-backed militias have previously attacked US forces from positions in Iraq and Syria.^[xi] US forces retaliated with attacks against Iranian-backed militia positions in Syria. Using proxies to attack US forces obfuscates Iran's role and gives it plausible deniability. Iranian calculations to target US forces in Syria aligns with Iran's goals in preventing an attack on Iran and Iran's offensive regional strategy.^[xii]

Iranian Activities in Iraq

This section covers Iranian efforts to consolidate and expand Tehran's economic, military, and political influence throughout Iraq. This section examines some of the many campaigns that Iran is pursuing to achieve this strategic objective. CTP will update and refine our assessments of these campaigns over time and in future updates.

Iranian media circulated reports of an IRGC-conducted a drone strike targeting Kurdish Iranian separatist groups in the Iraqi Kurdistan region on June 2. Iranian English-language news outlet *West Asia News Agency* cited unidentified Iranian outlets claiming that the IRGC bombed headquarters of Kurdish Iranian separatist groups in Iraqi Kurdistan.^[xiii] Iranian-backed proxy Telegram channels circulated the report and added that the IRGC had targeted the separatist groups in a drone strike.^[xiv] Iranian media has not yet reported on this incident, which deviates from the regime's regular pattern of reporting on Iranian strikes targeting Kurdish separatist groups in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Iranian Domestic Affairs

This section covers factors and trends affecting regime decision-making and stability. CTP will cover domestic politics, significant protest activity, and related issues here.

The Iranian regime is pursuing gas swaps with Turkmenistan, likely to preempt electricity shortages in the summer that could fuel internal unrest. President Ebrahim Raisi discussed increasing the volume of gas swaps with Turkmenistan during a meeting with Turkmenistan People's Council Chairman Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov in Tehran on May 30.^[xv] Iranian Oil Minister Javad Owji separately announced on May 30 that Iran and Turkmenistan will soon sign an agreement for Iran to import 10 million cubic meters of natural gas from Turkmenistan each day.^[xvi] Azerbaijan, Iran, and Turkmenistan previously signed a gas swap agreement in November 2021 wherein Iran transports Turkmen gas to Azerbaijan via the Iranian city of Astar.^[xvii] This deal allows Iran to use some of the gas it imports from Turkmenistan to supply electricity and heating to its northern provinces. Iranians previously protested power outages in Tehran, Fars, and Mazandaran Provinces in July 2021.^[xviii]

Iranian officials also discussed water problems with Berdymukhamedov on May 30. President Ebrahim Raisi praised Iranian-Turkmen water cooperation and discussed the Friendship Dam—a dam situated along the

Iran-Turkmenistan border in Khorasan Razavi Province—during a meeting with high-ranking Turkmen and Iranian officials on May 30.[xix] Iranian officials have expressed increased concern over Khorasan Razavi Province’s water supply in recent weeks.[xx] Iran’s water discussions with Turkmenistan also coincide with rising tensions over water rights between Iran and Afghanistan. The Raisi administration has placed greater pressure on the Afghan Taliban to release water from the Helmand River to Sistan and Baluchistan Province in recent weeks because it is concerned that water shortages could precipitate unrest in this province.[xxi]

Iran could decrease the volume of natural gas it keeps from gas swaps with Turkmenistan to gain water concessions. The Turkmen government has no incentive to provide Iran with more water, however, given that many Turkmen farmers rely on the Friendship Dam for water. A regime decision to risk natural gas imports for water concessions would indicate that Iran currently prioritizes water issues over energy issues.

Iranian security personnel violently suppressed an anti-regime demonstration in Abdanan, Ilam Province on June 1, demonstrating that protesters remain undeterred from further protest despite the brutal regime crackdown during the Mahsa Amini movement.[xxii] Social media users reported that security forces shot at and injured at least 20 individuals protesting the suspicious death of 21-year-old Bamshad Soleimankhani, who died shortly after he was released from prison. CTP previously recorded a significant uptick in anti-regime protests in May 2023 compared to April and March of this year.[xxiii]

[View Citations](#)



Iran Update, April 14, 2023

By Annika Ganzeveld, Amin Soltani, Johanna Moore and Nicholas Carl

April 14, 2023

April 14, 2023, 5:00 pm ET

The Iran Updates are produced by the Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute with support from the Institute for the Study of War (ISW). To receive Iran Updates via email, please subscribe [here](#).

The Iranian regime is attempting to manage rising tensions with Azerbaijan without conceding its strategic interests in the Caucasus. Iran and Azerbaijan have engaged in several rhetorical and diplomatic altercations in recent weeks, partially due to the Iranian regime's disapproval of strengthening Azerbaijani-Israeli relations.^[i] Supreme Leader International Affairs Advisor Ali Akbar Velayati published a statement on April 14 signaling the regime's—and specifically Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's—aversion to continuing down a path of escalation with Azerbaijan.^[ii] Velayati asserted that Iran has never been and never will be the initiator of a war. He added that Iran is concerned about Azerbaijan's interests and security and titled his statement “I am also an Azeri,” likely to emphasize the cultural and historical overlaps between Iran and Azerbaijan. Artesh Commander Major General Abdol Rahim Mousavi separately discussed Azerbaijan in a Quds Day speech in Tabriz, East Azerbaijan Province on April 14.^[iii] Mousavi condemned Israel's activities in Azerbaijan and stated that Iran desires “constructive” relations with its northern neighbor. Although Mousavi did not overtly threaten Azerbaijan, that he gave this speech in East Azerbaijan—an Iranian province that borders Azerbaijan—signals to Baku that the regime will not sacrifice its interests in the Caucasus to end the pattern of escalation. Mousavi additionally gave this speech on Quds Day—an annual Iran-sponsored holiday against Israel—to underscore that the regime will not tolerate Azerbaijan permitting Israel to use its territory to launch operations against Iran. The contrasting tone of Velayati and Mousavi's statements reflects these officials' different positions in the regime; Velayati is a diplomat and Mousavi is a military commander. It is unclear whether Iran's approach to Azerbaijan will succeed in reducing tensions, however, given that Iran's interests in the Caucasus are largely incompatible with those of Azerbaijan.

President Ebrahim Raisi gave a televised speech for Quds Day in place of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, possibly indicating Khamenei's continued support for Raisi as Iran's next supreme leader. Palestinian television channels broadcast a Quds Day message from Raisi in the Gaza Strip on April 14.^[iv] CTP has not previously observed Raisi giving a televised address on Quds Day, making his address and Khamenei's absence this year particularly noteworthy. CTP has not observed any indicators that would suggest Khamenei would be unable to deliver the speech, moreover. Raisi's more pronounced role in this year's Quds Day festivities may indicate that Khamenei wants to help portray Raisi as capable of leading the Axis of Resistance. CTP has previously observed indications that Raisi is a top candidate to succeed Khamenei.^[v]

Prominent Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid is calling on Iran's Shia population to consider an alternative and more moderate version of the Islamic Republic that would also limit the role of the supreme leader.^[vi] Abdol Hamid outlined his idea of a truly “Islamic Republic” during his April 14 sermon, consistent with his prior criticism of the Iranian regime as neither “Islamic” nor a “Republic,” which CTP previously reported.^[vii] Abdol Hamid characterized his ideal system as “moderately Islamic” and “close to a democracy” in which officials will be subject to the people's approval. Abdol Hamid also stated that no official would have “absolute authority” in that system, strictly limiting state authority to the traditional Quranic interpretation that “only God has absolute authority.”

Abdol Hamid is challenging the postrevolutionary foundation of the Islamic Republic even though he is calling for an Islamic system. Former Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini grounded the current regime in the notion of the *velayat-e motlagheh-ye faqih* (Absolute Rule of the Jurisprudent).^[viii] The supreme leader therefore has the absolute authority to not only implement God's commandments but to legislate his own laws if necessary to preserve the Islamic nature of the regime. This interpretation departs from the traditional Shia notion of *velayat-e faqih* (Rule of the Jurisprudent), which as Abdol Hamid expressed means “only God has absolute authority” and the Shia cleric only has the authority to interpret law without legislating it.

Abdol Hamid is using the softer interpretation of *Velayat-e Faqih* to propose a more moderate version of the Islamic Republic to the Shia population. Abdol Hamid remains undeterred despite the regime's repeated threats against him and his Sunni Baloch following, as CTP previously assessed.^[ix] That he would risk his own and his following's safety indicates that he is not simply attempting to carve out a permanent political space for his Sunni Baloch movement, but that he seeks to appeal to a much wider audience of observers. Not only does Shia tradition offer the flexibility to accommodate Abdol Hamid's political vision, but there are moderate factions in the regime that can bring about such change. Abdol Hamid may be trying to appeal to the moderate Shia factions both within society as well as the regime to adopt his vision, especially once the regime transitions from the current supreme leader to the next.

Key Takeaways

The Iranian regime is attempting to manage rising tensions with Azerbaijan without conceding its strategic interests in the Caucasus.

President Ebrahim Raisi gave a televised speech for Quds Day in place of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, possibly indicating Khamenei's continued support for Raisi as Iran's next supreme leader.

Prominent Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid is calling on Iran's Shia population to consider an alternative and more moderate version of the Islamic Republic that would also limit the role of the supreme leader.

The Iranian rial appreciated slightly from 509,500 rials to one US dollar on April 13 to 508,000 rials to one US dollar on April 14.

Palestinian Islamic Jihad Movement (PIJ) Secretary General Ziyad al Nakhlah and Lebanese Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah gave separate speeches using the usual anti-Israel rhetoric that is common on the Iran-sponsored International Quds Day.

Iraqi Shia cleric Muqtada al Sadr announced a freeze to all Sadrist Movement operations in response to a deviant faction of the Sadrist Movement named Ahl al Qadaa, the People of the Cause.

Israeli news outlet Channel 11 reported that Israel has closed six kilometers of airspace along the Lebanese, Syrian, and Gaza border, likely to preempt a possible strike into Israeli territory from Iranian-backed proxies in commemoration of Quds Day.

Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least one protest occurred on April 14. CTP assesses with high confidence that one protest occurred in the following location:

Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchistan[x]

Size: Small to medium

Demographic: Zahedan residents protesting after prominent Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid's Friday sermon

Notes: Protesters held a silent demonstration



Protest coordinators and organizations circulated calls for demonstrations on the following days:

April 15[xi]

Type: Student demonstrations against the mandatory hijab law

Location: Countrywide

April 16 and 18[xii]

Type: Demonstrations to commemorate the birthdays of three killed protesters

Location: Tehran City, Tehran Province and Karaj, Alborz Province

Sistan and Baluchistan Province Armed Forces Judicial Organization Chief Abol Fazl Mah Goli announced on April 13 indictments against the perpetrators of the September 2022 “Bloody Friday” massacre in Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchistan Province.[xiii] Mah Goli stated that some state security personnel who shot at citizens “went to extremes.” Mahgoli’s announcement follows prominent Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid’s meeting with the families of “Bloody Friday” victims on April 11.[xiv] Abdol Hamid met with these families, likely to invoke memories of the massacre and rally his supporters, as CTP previously assessed.[xv]

Economic Affairs

The Iranian rial appreciated slightly from 509,500 rials to one US dollar on April 13 to 508,000 rials to one US dollar on April 14.[xvi]

External Security and Military Affairs

Palestinian Islamic Jihad Movement (PIJ) Secretary General Ziyad al Nakhalah and Lebanese Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah gave separate speeches using the usual anti-Israel rhetoric that is common on the Iran-sponsored International Quds Day. Both speeches highlighted the strength and unity of the Axis of Resistance and vowed to support the Palestinian resistance against Israel.[xvii] Nasrallah discussed Hamas’s rocket attacks into northern Israel on April 6 and claimed that Hezbollah’s restraint and decision to remain silent while assessing the events that took place should worry Israel.[xviii] He also argued that Iran’s recent normalization with Saudi Arabia is a deliberate move to impede regional normalization among Arab states with Israel.

Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba Secretary General Akhram Kaabi gave a speech during Quds Day celebrations in Baghdad in which he threatened US forces in Iraq. Kaabi rejected the American presence in Iraq and called on US forces to withdraw immediately or be targeted in attacks. Kaabi also claimed that the US Ambassador to Iraq conducted acts of sabotage from a US military base disguised as the embassy.[xix] Kaabi’s comments targeting the US Ambassador to Iraq is a notable intensification of rhetoric as compared to other speeches given by proxy leadership in Baghdad. Kaabi’s statements mirror that of the 1979 Iranian Revolution that claimed the US Embassy in Tehran was a “den of spies” used to engineer the 1953 coup.[xx] This designation of the US Embassy in 1979 was used as justification by protesters to storm the embassy. Iraqi protesters in 2019 similarly referred to the US Embassy in Baghdad as the “den of spies” in reference to the 1979 Embassy storming.[xxi]

Iranian-backed proxy media released a dramatized propaganda video showing proxies from across Iran’s Axis of Resistance collaborating on plans for an attack on Israel.[xxii] The propaganda video follows the Axis’s uniform message of solidarity with the Palestinian resistance cause and cohesion across the Axis. Iranian-backed Iraqi proxy groups additionally staged a series of marches in Baghdad, Nasiriyah, Hillah, Maysan, Kirkuk, Khadimiya, and Sanaa.[xxiii] Iranian-backed Telegram channel *Sabreen and Tura* reported that tens of thousands of supporters had turned out to the Quds Day marches, however, footage and images from proxy-affiliated media shows that the demonstrators numbered in the low hundreds with a Quds Day event in Sanaa possibly numbering over 1,000 demonstrators.[xxiv]

Unidentified sources told Syrian-opposition outlet SyriaTV that the IRGC Quds Force moved the primary location for covert meetings from Damascus to Beirut in response to Israeli airstrikes in Damascus targeting Quds Force leadership. [xxv] The Quds Force decided to move following an Israeli airstrike targeting a Quds Force meeting in Qafr Souseh on February 19. According to the source, IRGC Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani determined that Syrian officers were responsible for intelligence leaks to Israel.

Iraqi Shia cleric Muqtada al Sadr announced a freeze to all Sadrism Movement operations in response to a deviant faction of the Sadrism Movement named Ahl al Qadaa, the People of the Cause.[xxvi] Ahl al Qadaa claimed that Sadr is the Imam Mehdi and called on its followers to attend I’tikaf, a practice of staying at a mosque for several days commonly at the end of Ramadan, with Sadr to pledge their allegiance to him.[xxvii] Sadr rejected the claims and claimed that the faction was corrupt.[xxviii] The Iraqi Judiciary announced that “dozens” of Ahl al Qadaa members were arrested on April 14 as gang members promoting ideas contributing to discord and civil disruption.[xxix]

Israeli news outlet Channel 11 reported that Israel has closed six kilometers of airspace along the Lebanese, Syrian, and Gaza border, likely to preempt a possible strike into Israeli territory from Iranian-backed proxies in commemoration of Quds Day.[xxx] The no-fly-zone is in effect until Sunday April 16.[xxxi] Israel’s state-owned Channel 12 news also reported that Iron Dome systems had been redeployed across Israel under heightened security.[xxxii]

[View Citations](#)



Iran Update, February 17, 2023

By Annika Ganzeveld, Kitaneh Fitzpatrick, Johanna Moore and Frederick W. Kagan

February 17, 2023

February 17, 2023, 5:00 pm ET

The Iran Updates are produced by the Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute with support from the Institute for the Study of War (ISW). To receive Iran Updates via email, please subscribe [here](#).

Contributor: Anya Caraiani, James Motamed, and Amin Soltani

Note: CTP will not publish an Iran Update on February 20, 2023, for Presidents' Day. CTP will resume publishing on February 21.

Actors from across the Iranian political spectrum are publicly acknowledging Mir Hossein Mousavi's February 4 call for "foundational change" in the Islamic Republic. Mousavi discussed holding a referendum on whether to maintain the Islamic Republic and suggested drafting a new constitution on February 4, as CTP previously reported. Prominent Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid expressed support for a referendum on the "regime and system" during his weekly Friday prayer sermon in Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchistan Province on February 17.^[i] Abdol Hamid did not explicitly reference Mousavi, but his use of the term "referendum" demonstrates that he is likely seeking to keep Mousavi's idea of "foundational change" at the forefront of Iran's internal political debate.

Mousavi's political opponents have also publicly discussed his February 4 statement in recent days. Ardabil Friday Prayer Leader Seyyed Hassan Amali stated on February 17 that pro-regime marches on February 11 symbolized a "national referendum," suggesting that the regime is attempting to appropriate Mousavi's message in order to increase its own legitimacy.^[ii] The Reformist Front Coordination Council separately released a statement on February 16 endorsing Khatami's February 5 statement but rejecting Mousavi's "approach of amending the constitution after obtaining the opinion of the people through a referendum."^[iii] By publicly discussing Mousavi's revolutionary statement, these opponents are inadvertently legitimizing the very ideas they seek to undermine. This may have the unintended consequence of increasing support and traction among the Iranian people and various government officials for Mousavi's call for fundamental change.

Iran is reportedly taking advantage of humanitarian aid convoys to move rockets or missiles into eastern Syria. *The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR)* reported that Iran-backed militants deposited two weapons shipments at a warehouse in Abu Kamal and a third at a warehouse in Deir Ezzour, Syria.^[iv] Shipments to Abu Kamal and Deir Ezzour allegedly included munitions and unspecified logistical equipment according to SOHR.^[v] Iran-backed militias transported weapons shipments in humanitarian aid convoys for earthquake victims as CTP previously reported.^[vi]

CTP is currently considering three possible courses of action that Iranian-backed proxies may take. Weapons shipments containing short-range munitions may be used to target US and Coalition targets in the vicinity of Deir Ezzour. CTP previously reported that likely Iran-backed militants flew a reconnaissance drone over the Conoco Mission Support Site as a test of US air defense systems, according to an unspecified Iranian military advisor on February 16.^[vii] Short-range rockets would also be capable of reaching this site. However, Iranian weapons shipments to Syria containing mid to long-range munitions would likely be used to hit Israeli targets. Alternatively, Iran-backed militants may not be planning an imminent strike and instead may be taking advantage of humanitarian aid convoys to stockpile weapons for future attacks. CTP will continue to monitor developments and refine its assessment.

Iran targeted an Israeli-owned oil tanker in the Arabian Sea on February 10, according to Western reports. A BBC journalist announced on February 17 that Iranian drones had targeted the commercial *Campo Square* ship but caused no serious damage or casualties, citing a US military official.^[viii] The source stated that the attack involved several Iranian ships and likely a Shahed-136 drone, one of the UAVs Russia has been using in its invasion of Ukraine.^[ix] The February 10 attack on the *Campo Square* may be a retaliation to the Israeli drone strike on a military munitions factory near Esfahan City, Esfahan Province on January 28.

Key Takeaways

Actors from across the Iranian political spectrum are publicly acknowledging Mir Hossein Mousavi's February 4 call for "foundational change" in the Islamic Republic.

Iran is reportedly taking advantage of humanitarian aid convoys to move rockets or missiles into eastern Syria.

Iran targeted an Israeli-owned oil tanker in the Arabian Sea on February 10, according to Western reports.

At least four protests occurred in four cities across three provinces.

The Ministry of Intelligence and Security Deputy Hossein Hojjati stated on February 17 that approximately 30,000 security personnel participated in suppressing the Mahsa Amini protest movement.

Iranian officials continued to frame increased Sino-Iranian cooperation as a partial solution to Iran's deteriorating economic conditions.

Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least four protests occurred in four cities across three provinces on February 17. CTP assesses with high confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Galikash, Golestan Province^[x]

Size: Small

Khash, Sistan and Baluchistan Province^[xi]

Size: Small

Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchistan Province^[xii]

Size: Medium

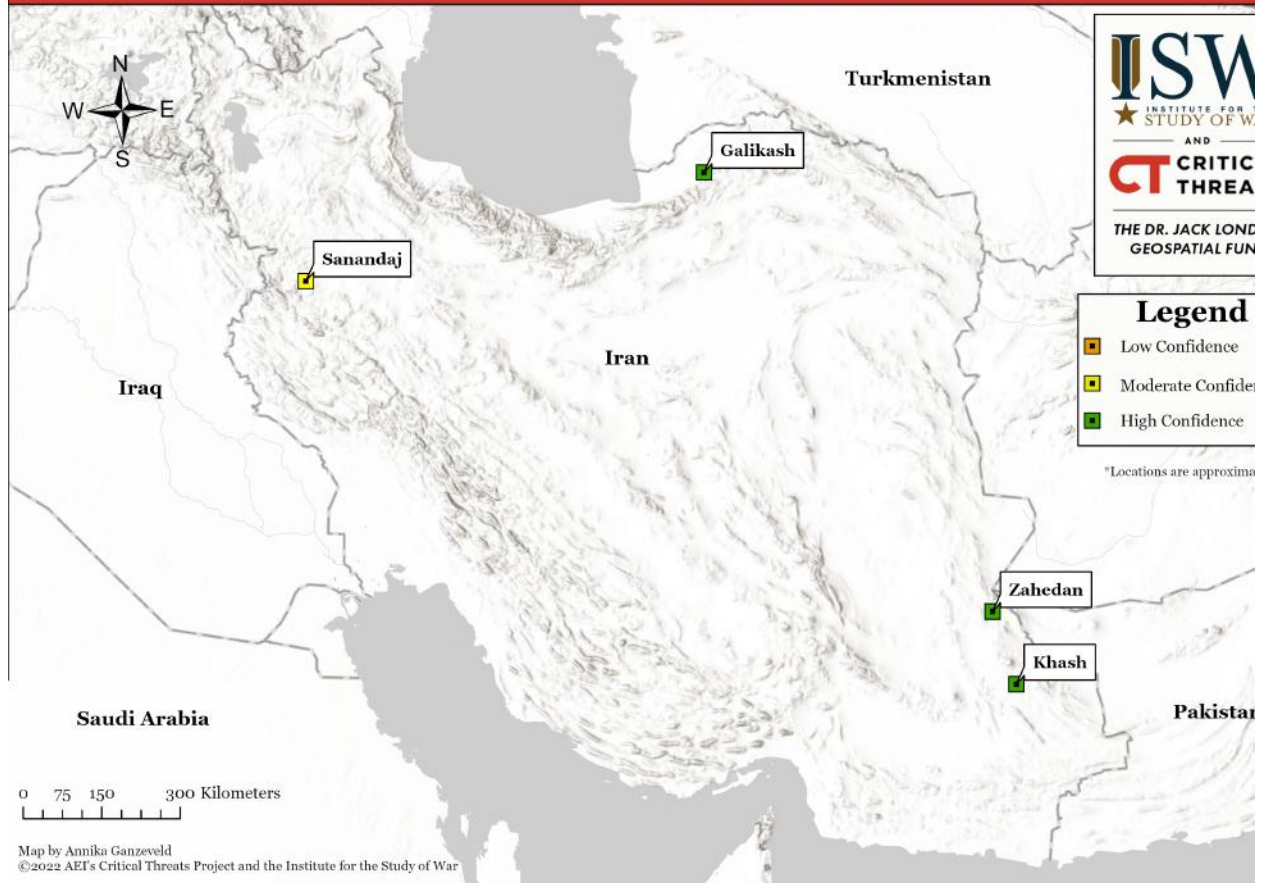
Notes: Protests follow Prominent Sunni Cleric Abdol Hamid's weekly Friday prayer sermon

CTP assess with moderate confidence that one protest occurred in the following location:

Sanandaj, Kurdistan Province^[xiii]

Size: Small

Protest Activity in Iran as of February 17, 5:00 PM



Senior military officials highlighted Iranian naval and air defense capabilities on February 17. Artesh Air Defense Force Commander Brigadier General Alireza Sabahi Fard assessed the combat readiness of air defense units in the vicinity of the Persian Gulf. Sabahi Fard stated that the Artesh Air Defense Force had adopted a strategy to confront threats to Iranian security without providing further details.^[xiv] Artesh Navy Commander Rear Admiral Shahram Irani separately warned that Iran would not tolerate “the slightest damage” to Iranian ships and discussed advances in Iranian naval capabilities.^[xv] Law Enforcement Command Border Guard Commander Brigadier General Ahmad Ali Goudarzi additionally noted that Iran was continuing to strengthen its drone and naval capabilities.^[xvi]

The Ministry of Intelligence and Security Deputy Hossein Hojjati stated on February 17 that approximately 30,000 security personnel participated in suppressing the Mahsa Amini protest movement.^[xvii] Prosecutor General Mohammad Jafar Montazeri previously stated on February 9 that over 90 security officers had died as a result of recent unrest, as CTP previously reported.^[xviii]

An Iranian military court sentenced former Chabahar, Sistan and Baluchistan Province Law Enforcement Commander Ebrahim Kochak Zai to 15 months in prison for “creating an atmosphere of skepticism towards the police” on February 17.^[xix] The court permanently discharged Zai from his duties. Protests erupted in Chabahar, Sistan and Baluchistan Province in late September 2022 following reports that Zai had raped a 15-year-old female resident.^[xx]

Foreign Affairs and Diplomacy

Iranian officials continued to frame increased Sino-Iranian cooperation as a partial solution to Iran's deteriorating economic conditions on February 17. Foreign Affairs Ministry Economic Diplomacy Deputy Mehdi Safari and Trade Development Organization Head Alireza Peyman Pak announced that President Ebrahim Raisi had signed 19 additional agreements and contracts on Sino-Chinese economic cooperation in recent days. Safari and Peyman Pak noted that the 19 agreements and contracts amounted to 3.5 billion US dollars and were separate from the 20 agreements that Raisi signed in Beijing on February 14.^[xxi] Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian separately described the agreements as “a new horizon” on the same date.^[xxii]

External Security and Military Affairs

US and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) targeted and killed ISIS leader Hamza al-Homsi in a helicopter raid in Al-Hajna village, Deir Ezzor on February 16. The mission resulted in the injury of four US service members and one working dog. The US and SDF did not kill or capture other ISIS members.^[xxiii]

[View Citations](#)



Iran Crisis Update, January 26, 2023

By Annika Ganzeveld, Nicholas Carl, Kitaneh Fitzpatrick, Johanna Moore and Frederick W. Kagan
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Ongoing disruptions to Iran’s energy supplies may be generating severe air pollution. Semi-official ISNA reported on January 26 that the city of Tehran has introduced “emergency ambulance buses” to transport citizens affected by dangerous air pollution levels.^[i] Iranian media outlets have also reported school closures in various cities due to air pollution in recent days.^[ii] This pollution may be caused by power plants burning low grade fuel due to shortages of more refined product.

Iran’s ongoing energy crisis could both impede and trigger further protests. An usually harsh winter and high air pollution levels may explain why protest turnout has decreased in recent weeks. This crisis may increase frustration among the population and precipitate new unrest, on the other hand. The first known protest inspired by natural gas shortages during the Mahsa Amini protest wave occurred in Torbat-e Jam on January 16, as CTP previously reported.^[iii] Petrochemical workers across Iran have also protested against poor living conditions in recent days.^[iv] The regime’s inability to resolve this crisis may drive frustrated citizens to challenge the regime despite harsh natural conditions.

Iranian officials had hoped to benefit from a harsh winter in Europe and a mild winter in Iran, but have instead suffered from the inverse weather pattern.^[v]

The Iranian Neighborhood Youth Union (INYU) is apparently trying to cooperate with foreign governments and possibly the Iranian diaspora to internationally isolate the regime. The INYU released a statement on January 26 emphasizing the importance of external outreach and using legal frameworks to present the crimes of the regime to the international community.^[vi] The INYU also claimed that the protest movement has had several achievements internationally, such as facilitating the UN removal of Iran from the Commission on the Status of Women, the European Parliament call on the EU to designate the IRGC as a terrorist organization, and the US de-prioritization of the nuclear talks. The INYU previously described the protest movement as entering a new period characterized by external outreach, insurgent activity, and greater centralization and cohesion within the movement, as CTP previously reported on January 13.^[vii]

Such external outreach could be an effective means of generating support for the Iranian people against the regime within the international community. Ukrainian citizens have played a similarly essential role in defending their country and establishing broad international support through person-to-person engagement since the Russian invasion. Ukrainians have used decentralized and informal networks to help drive and maintain international support for Ukraine.

Security forces have reportedly maintained their heightened presence around Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchistan Province, likely in preparation for the weekly Friday sermon from prominent Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid. [viii] Abdol Hamid criticized the "intensification of the security atmosphere" on January 25, as CTP previously reported. [ix] Some social media accounts reported military helicopters flying above some smaller towns outside Iranshahr, Sistan and Baluchistan Province as well. [x] It is unclear in what direction the helicopters were headed.

Key Takeaways

- **Ongoing disruptions to Iranian energy supplies may be generating severe air pollution.**
- **The Iranian Neighborhood Youth Union (INYU) is apparently trying to cooperate with foreign governments and possibly the Iranian diaspora to internationally isolate the regime.**
- **Security forces have reportedly maintained their heightened presence around Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchistan Province, likely in preparation for the weekly Friday sermon from prominent Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid.**
- **At least two protests occurred in two cities across two provinces.**
- **Shiraz City Governor Lotfollah Shibani announced January 26 that local merchants are required to deny services to unveiled women.**
- **Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi blamed the Mahsa Amini protest movement on a cultural schism between Iranian youth and the values of the Islamic Republic on January 26.**
- **Iranian media circulated a survey demonstrating limited domestic engagement with regime-endorsed social media outlets on January 26.**
- **Protesters gathered outside the Iraqi Central Bank in Baghdad, Basra, Dhi Qar, and Diwaniyah to protest ongoing economic crises.**

Anti-Regime Protests

At least two protests occurred in two cities across two provinces on January 26. CTP assesses with moderate confidence that one protest occurred in the following location:

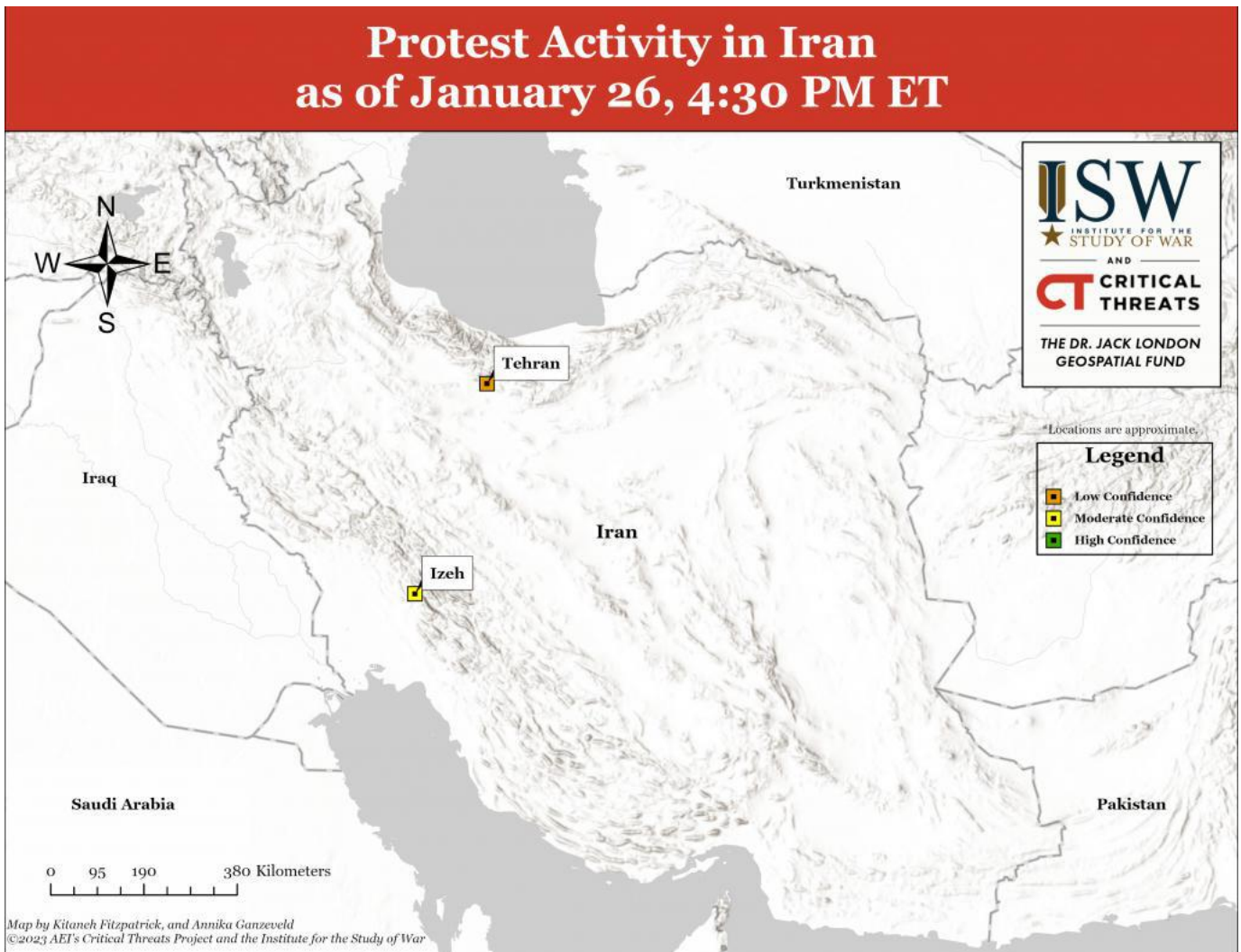
Izeh, Khuzestan Province [xi]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Mourners
- **Notes:** 40-day commemoration ceremony

CTP assesses with low confidence that one protest occurred in the following location:

Tehran City, Tehran Province^[xii]

- Size: Small
- Demographic: Workers
- Notes: Gathered in front of the Education Ministry to demonstrate against low wages



Protest coordinators and organizations circulated calls for demonstrations and/or strikes on the following days:

January 27^[xiii]

- Type: Demonstrations in solidarity with oppressed Iranian Baloch.
- Location: Countrywide

Shiraz City Governor Lotfollah Shibani announced January 26 that local merchants are required to deny services to unveiled women. He warned that the regime recently closed a dentist's office due to the presence of unveiled staff and patients. Shibani's announcement reflects Iranian authorities' efforts to resume mass enforcement of the mandatory hijab law. The regime has refocused on enforcing widespread adherence to the hijab requirement in recent weeks after briefly and informally relaxing such restrictions in late 2022, as CTP previously assessed.^[xiv]

Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi blamed the Mahsa Amini protest movement on a cultural schism between Iranian youth and the values of the Islamic Republic on January 26. Vahidi claimed that arrested protesters exhibited a "disconnection from spirituality and God" and blamed Western media outlets for exacerbating this disconnection. Vahidi additionally stressed the importance of prayer in safeguarding the regime, quoting Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.^[xv] Iranian leadership has endorsed greater indoctrination efforts to resolve public frustrations within the past several weeks, as CTP has previously reported.^[xvi]

Iranian media circulated a survey demonstrating limited domestic engagement with regime-endorsed social media outlets on January 26. Only one percent of survey respondents stated that they had replaced foreign-based messaging applications with indigenously-made platforms.^[xvii] Regime authorities have long sought to replace Western social media platforms with Iranian alternatives to crack down on domestic dissent and expand cyber monitoring of the Iranian population.

Axis of Resistance and Regional Developments

Protesters gathered outside the Iraqi Central Bank in Baghdad, Basra, Dhi Qar, and Diwaniyah to protest ongoing economic crises.^[xviii] Protesters demanded a stabilized exchange rate between the Iraqi dinar and US dollar, banking system reforms, and oversight measures to prevent corruption.^[xix] The Iraqi Dinar exchange rate has increased to 1,460.50 IQD to 1 USD on January 26 following several weeks of fluctuation.^[xx] Iran-backed proxies and pro-Iranian media have attributed the currency devaluation to sanctions the US Treasury placed on several private Iraqi banks that have restricted dollars flowing into Iran.^[xxi]

[i] <https://www.isna.ir/news/1401110604632/%D9%88%DB%8C%D8%AF%DB%8C%D9%88-%D8%A7%DA%AF%D8%B1-%D9%86%D9%81%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%86-%DA%AF%D8%B1%D9%81%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%A8%D9%88%D8%B3-%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D9%88%D8%B1%DA%98%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B3%DB%8C-%D9%87%D8%B3%D8%AA>

[ii] <https://www.irna.ir/news/85005527/%D8%AA%D8%BA%DB%8C%DB%8C%D8%B1-%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AA-%DA%A9%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%88-%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%B7%DB%8C%D9%84%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%AE%DB%8C->

%D9%85%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B3-%D9%82%D8%B2%D9%88%DB%8C%D9%86-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%BE%DB%8C-%D8%A2%D9%84%D9%88%D8%AF%DA%AF%DB%8C

[iii] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-january-16-2023>

[iv] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-january-23-2023>

[v] <https://observers.france24.com/en/middle-east/20230125-iran-gas-shortage-electricity-blackouts-power-harsh-winter> ; <https://oilprice.com/Latest-Energy-News/World-News/Iran-Offers-To-Help-Europe-With-Oil-And-Gas-Deliveries-This-Winter.html>

[vi] https://t.me/fa_UYI/81

[vii] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-january-13-2023>

[viii] <https://twitter.com/1500tasvir/status/1618625525622386689?s=20&t=jcYRZVCmMpLb1LYHpwpFQ>;
<https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1618634746908807168?cxt=HHwWgMDU6b7uxfYsAAAA>

[ix] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-january-25-2023>

[x] <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1618636501755236358?cxt=HHwWjMDQuDHUxvYsAAAA>;
<https://twitter.com/haalvsh/status/1618592756091486208?s=20&t=jcYRZVCmMpLb1LYHpwpFQ>;
https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1618525177134084098?s=20&t=QI7w8PLwKE_LV425c4iW1w

[xi] <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1618615530155577345?cxt=HHwWgsDU7faPvfYsAAAA> ;
https://twitter.com/javanan_Kh/status/1618606487424897025?s=20&t=BVILc3g1ejvs35U38kR7Uw ;
<https://twitter.com/indyPersian/status/1618627204195450888?s=20&t=BVILc3g1ejvs35U38kR7Uw>

[xii] https://twitter.com/hra_news/status/1618596239527841792?s=20&t=JZ9xKobAnlPYGNp5ariRKA

[xiii] https://twitter.com/javanane_zhdn/status/1618202946277371910?s=20&t=YZJWokykB5J0oIwz_rKYvA

[xiv] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-january-10-2023>

[xv] <https://diarmirza.ir/1401/11/%D9%85%D8%B4%DA%A9%D9%84-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B2%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%AA%E2%80%8C%D8%B4%D8%AF%DA%AF%D8%A7%D8%A7%D8%BA%D8%AA%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D8%AE%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%8C-%D9%82%D8%B7/>

[xvi] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-december-31>

[xvii] <https://t.co/SYLSirjQB3>

[xviii] https://twitter.com/Tammuz_Intel/status/1618163718889824262

[xix] [https://www\(dot\)alaraby.co.uk/economy/%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%80%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AF-%D9%82%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%83%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%88%D9%82%D9%81-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B1](https://www(dot)alaraby.co.uk/economy/%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%80%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AF-%D9%82%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%83%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%88%D9%82%D9%81-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B1)

[xx] <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-729103>

<https://www.forbes.com/advisor/money-transfer/currency-converter/iqd-usd/>

[xxi] <https://www.voanews.com/a/iraqi-pm-replaces-central-bank-governor-over-currency-drop/6929845.html>