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Iran Update, June 2, 2023

Iran Update, June 2, 2023

Annika Ganzeveld, Andie Parry, Ashka Jhaveri, Johanna Moore, and Kitaneh Fitzpatrick

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.[1] Iranian-backed militias killed at least 603 US personnel in Iraq with EFPs from 2003 to 2011.[2] 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.[3] 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.[4] Iranian-backed militias have also accelerated the training and use of drone capabilities in Deir ez Zor Province since April.[5] These capabilities enable Iranian-backed militias to carry out attacks on US bases, ground forces, and helicopters in Syria. [6] 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.[7]

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.[8] 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.[9] The Iraq-based Iranian proxy group Liwa al Ghaliboun killed a US contractor in an attack on US forces in Syria on March 23.[10]

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.[11] 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.[12]

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.[13] Iranian-backed proxy Telegram channels circulated the report and added that the IRGC had targeted the separatist groups in a drone strike.[14] 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.[15] 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.[16] 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 Astara.[17] 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.[18]

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.[19] Iranian officials have expressed increased concern over Khorasan Razavi Province's water supply in recent weeks.[20] 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.[21]

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 Abadan, Ilam Province on June 1, demonstrating that protesters remain undeterred from further

protest despite the brutal regime crackdown during the Mahsa Amini movement.[22] 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.[23]

Iran Update, June 5, 2023

Iran Update, June 5, 2023

Ashka Jhaveri, Amin Soltani, Johanna Moore, Annika Ganzeveld, and Kitaneh Fitzpatrick

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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. 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 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). BAGHDAD - 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). SANANDAJ- 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). TEHRAN - 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.

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.[1] 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.[2] 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.[3] 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.[4]

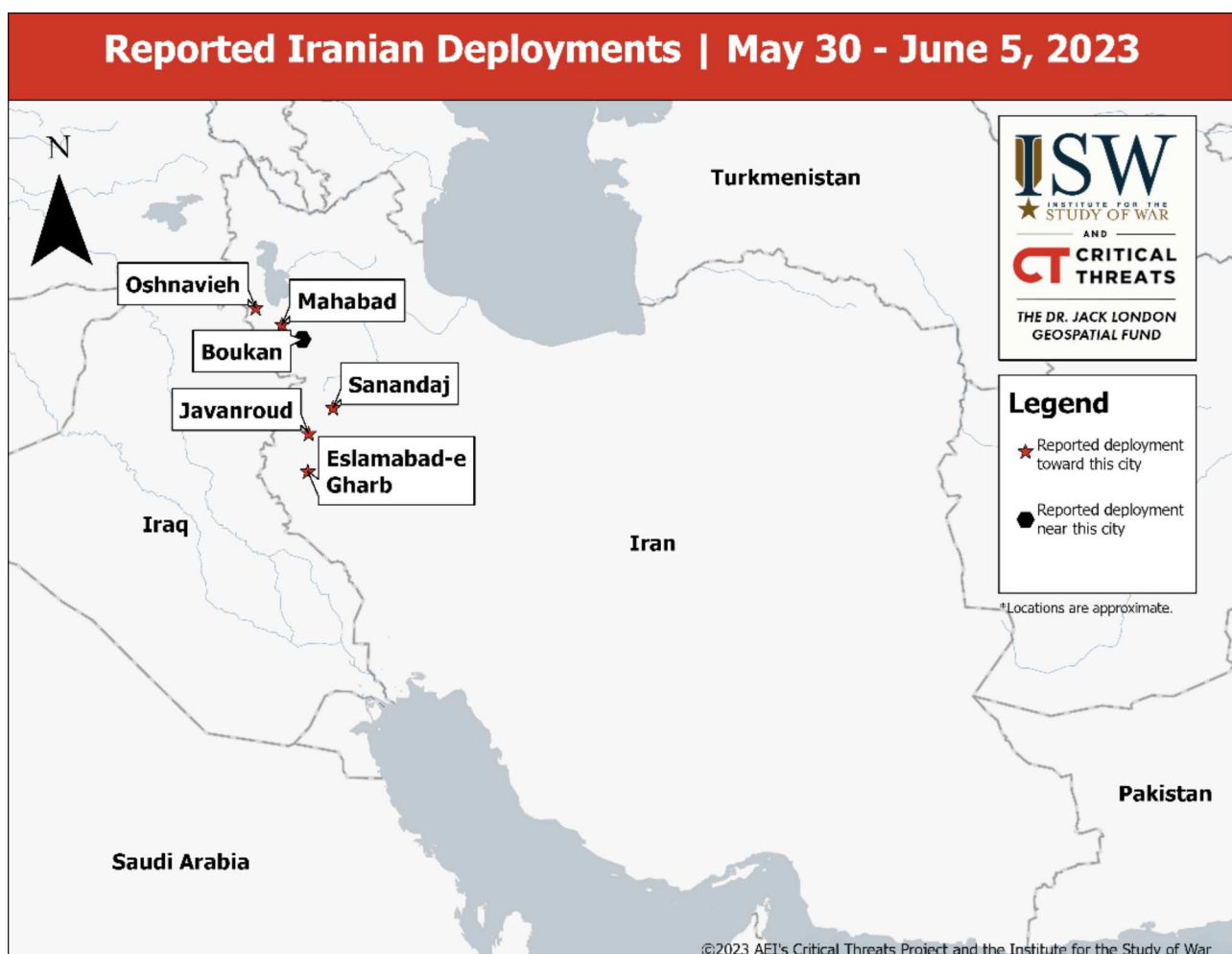
Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) Unit 127 drone specialists also conducted a drone exercise for an unspecified delegation in Palmyra, approximately 120 kilometers from the US Al Tanf Garrison, on June 3.[5] Iranian-backed militias have previously conducted intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance flights 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.[6]

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.[7] 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.[8] Kataib Hezbollah (KH)-backed Telegram channel *Tura News* circulated both announcements, which suggests that the groups may be affiliated with KH.[9]

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.[10] 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.[11] HAN formed in 2013 as an offshoot from Asaib Ahl al Haq (AAH) and is closely affiliated with the IRGC Quds Force.[12] 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.



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.[13]

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. [14] 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.[15] 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.[16] 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. [17] 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.[18]

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.[19] 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.

Iran Update, June 6, 2023

Iran Update, June 6, 2023

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

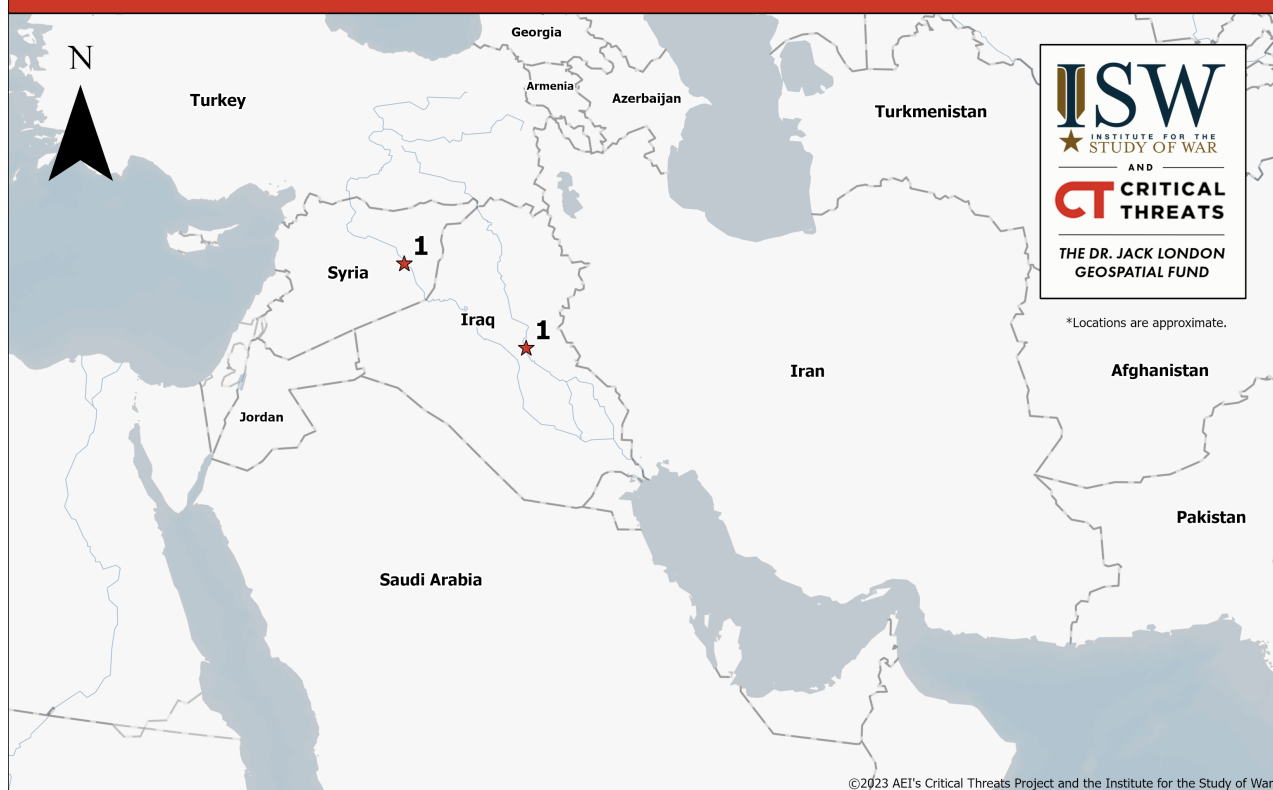
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Key Takeaway

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 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.

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.^[1] 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.^[2] 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[3]

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.^[4] 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.

Iran Update, June 7, 2023

Iran Update, June 7, 2023

Andie Parry, Annika Ganzeveld, and Nicholas Carl

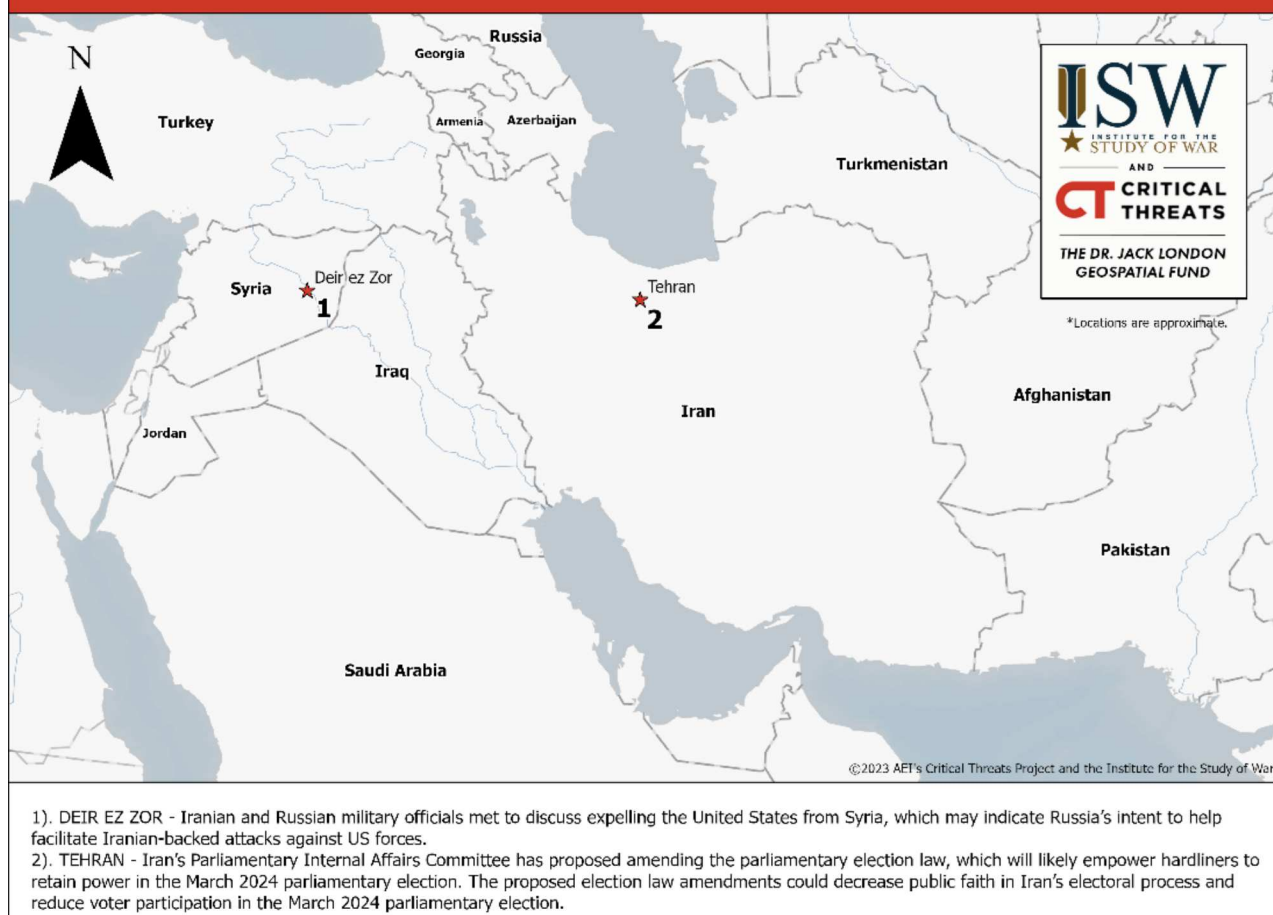
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Key Takeaways

- 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



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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*.^[1] 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.^[2] 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.^[3]

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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.^[4] 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.[5]

Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi stated on June 5 that Parliament approved the proposed amendments.[6] The Expediency Discernment Council is currently reviewing the amendments’ “contradictions with the regime’s general policies,” however.[7] 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. [8]

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.[9] 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.[10] 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.[11] Strengthening the Guardian Council’s ability to influence elections would decrease the significance of citizens’ votes.

[1] <https://eyeofeuphrates.com/ar/news/2023/06/06/8750>

[2] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-june-6-2023>

[3] <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/06/01/discord-leaks-iran-russi...>

[4] <https://www.khabaronline.com/ir/news/1772167>

[5] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/US-must-be-wary-as-irans-parlia...> ;

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/factbox-the-outcome-of-...>

[6] <https://www.irna.com/ir/news/85130213>

[7] <https://aftabnews.com/ir/fa/news/844449>

[8] <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploa...>

[9] <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/factbox-the-outcome-of-...>

[10] <https://www.khabaronline.com/ir/news/1772167>

[11] <https://www.tabnak.com/ir/fa/news/1178023>

Iran Update, June 8, 2023

Iran Update, June 8, 2023

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

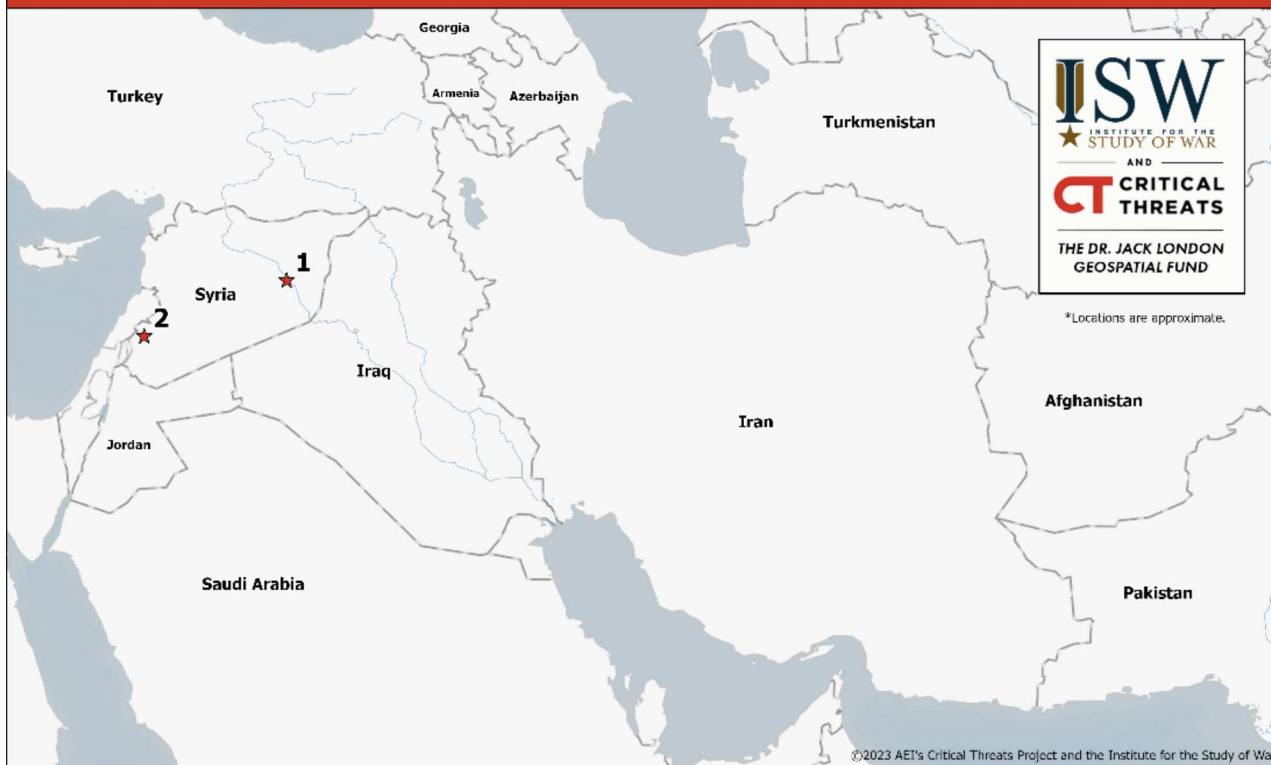
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Key Takeaways

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.

Iran Update | June 8, 2023



- 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*.^[1] He also indicated that the recruits would conduct unspecified military operations against US and SDF forces.^[2] The Nasr Center is offering new recruits between 700,000 and one million Syrian Pounds (SYPs).^[3] 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).^[4]

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).^[5] 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.^[6]

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.^[7] 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 Raqqah Province on May 10.[8] 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.[9] 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.[10] 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.[11] 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
	• Iran warned of an attack		

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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Iran Update, June 9, 2023

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Andie Parry, Ashka Jhaveri, Johanna Moore, Amin Soltani, Annika Ganzeveld, and Nicholas Carl

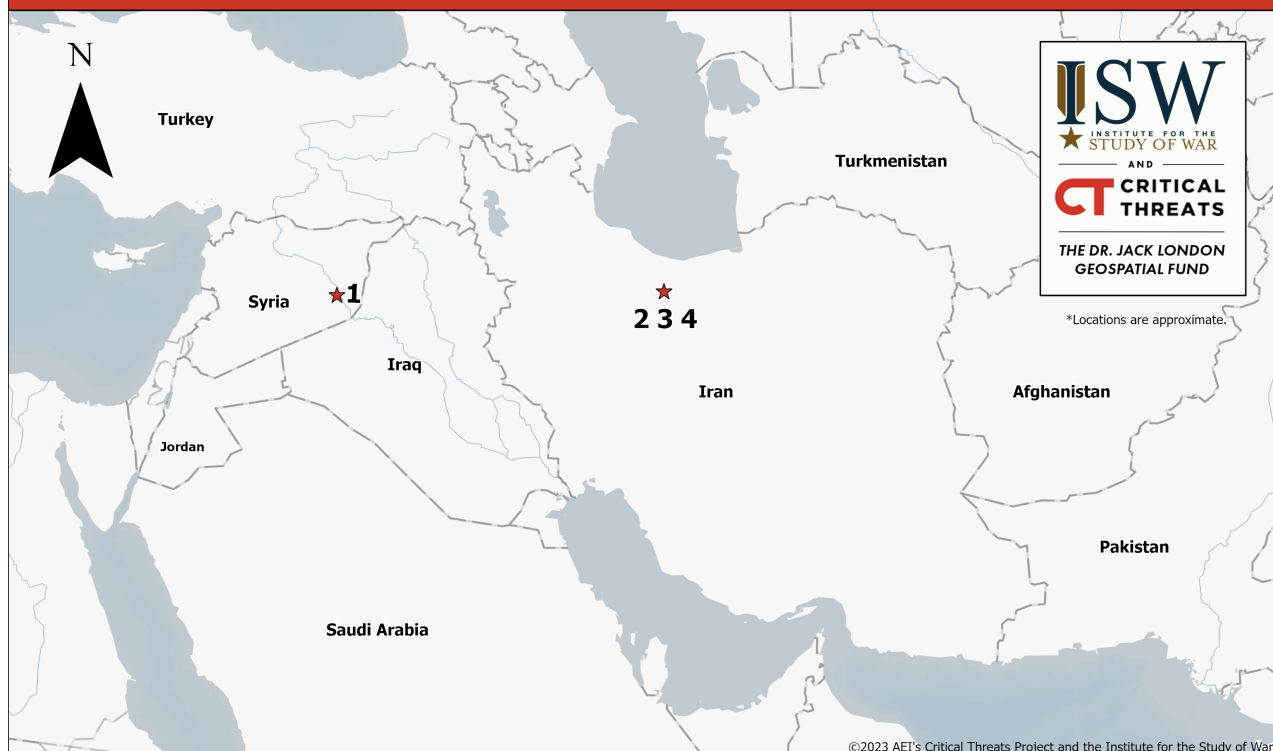
The Iran Update aims to inform national security policy by providing timely, relevant, and independent open-source analysis of developments pertaining to Iran and its Axis of Resistance. This update covers political, military, and economic events and trends that affect the stability and decision-making 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. 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



- 1). AL MAYADIN - 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.
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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.[1] 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.[2] 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.[3] 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.[4] Iranian-backed militias have previously targeted US forces from al Mayadin.[5]

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.

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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.[6] Iran's total stockpile of enriched uranium is over 14 times the permitted limit of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.[7] 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.[8] 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.[9] 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.[10] Western and Iranian media incorrectly reported that Iran had resolved both of the above inquiries.[11] Iran also did not provide a satisfactory explanation for the discrepancy in its natural uranium inventory at the conversion facility in Esfahan.[12] Iran could have been trying to conceal nuclear weapons-related activities by mixing diverted natural uranium back into its Esfahan inventory.[13] Iran has also not provided any explanations for the outstanding safeguards issues surrounding the Turqezabad and Varamin sites.[14]

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.[15] 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.[16] Kirby previously announced on May 15 that Russia is seeking to purchase new drones from Iran after expending most of its Iranian drone supply.[17] 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.[18] 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.[19] 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.[20] 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.

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[15] <https://apnews.com/article/russia-iran-drone-factory-ukraine-war-dfd46...>

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[17] <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/russia-is-seeking-more-attack-drones-...>

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[19] [https://www.entekhab dot ir/fa/news/729208](https://www.entekhab.ir/fa/news/729208)

[20] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-march-14-2023> ;

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Iran Update, June 12, 2023

Iran Update, June 12, 2023

Annika Ganzeveld, Amin Soltani, Johanna Moore, and Kitaneh Fitzpatrick

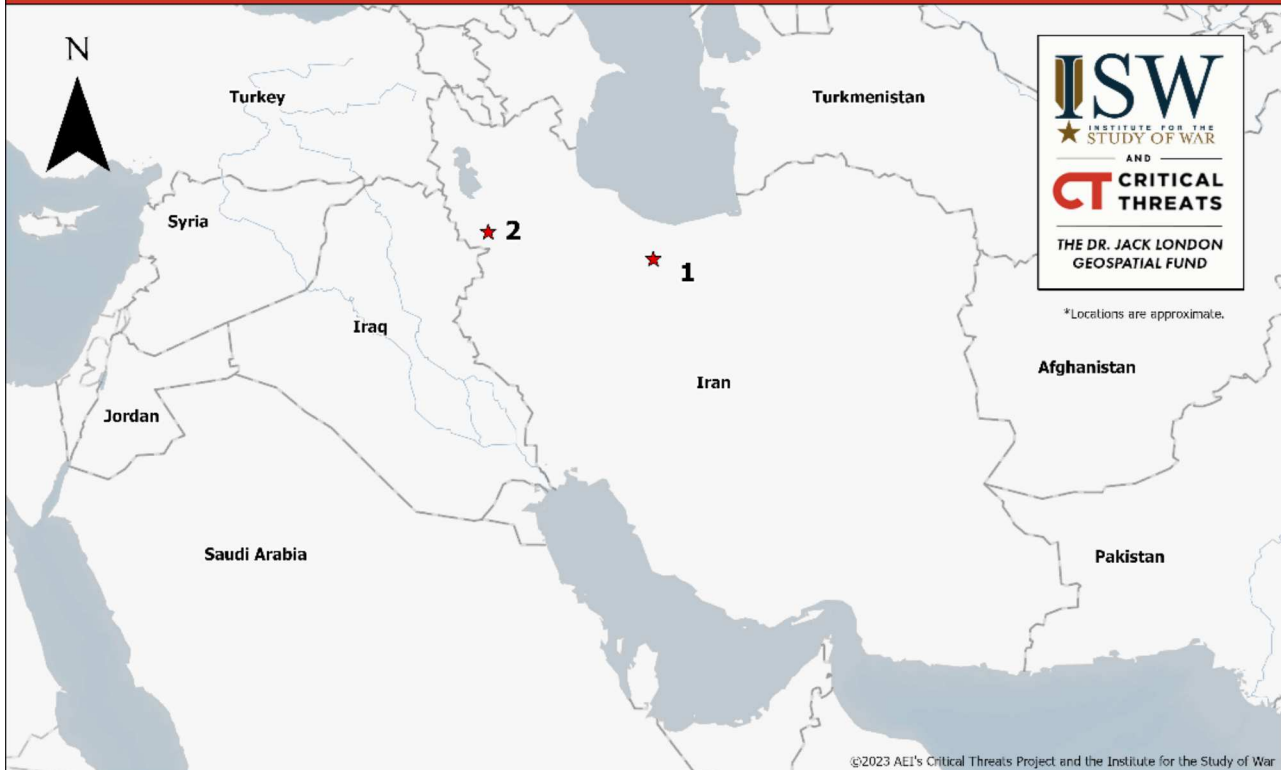
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Key Takeaways

1. Iranian officials are promoting reports of resumed nuclear negotiations with the United States likely to generate short-term benefits for the Iranian economy.
2. Iranian security forces are attempting to discourage citizens from holding commemoration ceremonies for killed Mahsa Amini protesters. Security forces' renewed violence against innocent citizens could revive anti-regime protests.

Iran Update | June 12, 2023



1. TEHRAN - Iranian officials are promoting reports of resumed nuclear negotiations with the United States likely to generate short-term benefits for the Iranian economy.

2. SAGHEZ - Iranian security forces are attempting to discourage citizens from holding commemoration ceremonies for killed Mahsa Amini protesters. Security forces' renewed violence against innocent citizens could revive anti-regime protests.

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.

Iraq's Parliament voted on the 2023-2025 Iraqi federal budget on June 11.[1] Parliament held four sessions between June 8 and June 11 to vote on articles of the proposed budget. Iraqi news outlets have not yet released the full budget. CTP will provide more information on the federal budget as more details emerge.

CTP previously assessed that the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) is poised to gain a significant increase in funds, likely enabling its members to strengthen the PMF's status as a parallel security institution to Iraqi state security services.[2] A draft of the budget from April 2023 showed that the PMF and proxy-affiliated ministries are expected to receive some of the largest budget increases in the 2023-2025 budget. The draft indicates that the PMF's total budget would increase by about 458 million USD and nearly double the number of employees under the PMF from 122,000 to 238,075 employees, for example.[3]

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.

Iranian officials are promoting reports of resumed nuclear negotiations with the United States likely to generate short-term benefits for the Iranian economy. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei expressed support for a nuclear deal that would preserve Iranian nuclear capabilities in a

publicized speech on June 11. Foreign Affairs Ministry Spokesperson Nasser Kanani and Mohammad Marandi, an advisor to the Raisi administration's nuclear negotiating team, separately amplified these reports by confirming on June 12 that the United States and Iran engaged in indirect nuclear negotiations in Oman in recent weeks.[4] The value of the Iranian rial has increased by five percent within the past six days, a trendline that Iranian media has framed as a response to reports of resumed nuclear talks.[5] Western, Israeli, and Iranian media have increasingly reported that the United States and Iran are discussing an interim agreement that includes unfreezing Iranian assets.[6] US and Iranian officials have rejected reports that an interim deal is imminent, however.[7]

Iranian security forces are attempting to discourage citizens from holding commemoration ceremonies for the Mahsa Amini protesters who were killed, which underscores the regime's concern that these ceremonies could trigger renewed anti-regime unrest. Social media users accused security forces of desecrating three Mahsa Amini protesters' graves on June 8 and 10. [8] Mahsa Amini's brother Ashkan Amini previously suggested that the regime desecrated his sister's grave on May 23.[9] CTP cannot verify these reports. Security forces separately detained at least 30 individuals who gathered at the Aichi Cemetery in Saghez, Kurdistan Province on June 9 to protest the Saghez Municipality's alleged efforts to "hide the grave of Mahsa Amini." [10]

Security forces' renewed violence against innocent citizens could revive anti-regime protests. Security forces shot and killed a nine-year-old boy after his father stole a car in Shoushtar, Khuzestan Province on June 10.[11] Security forces separately killed a relative of Kian Pirmalak, a child whom security personnel killed near a Mahsa Amini protest in November 2022, as he traveled to commemorate Pirmalak's birthday near Izeh, Khuzestan Province on June 11.[12] The regime's indiscriminate violence toward its citizens, children in particular, could revive calls for protests. A young woman from Semnan Province recently told the BBC that "too many young lives have been lost in the past few months for us to go back to how things were before," demonstrating lingering anti-regime sentiments among Iranian youth.[13] The regime has additionally failed to offer political and sociocultural concessions in the aftermath of the Mahsa Amini movement, representing another possible spark for renewed unrest. Iranian citizens have previously demonstrated that the regime's suppressive tactics fail to permanently quell anti-regime sentiments. [14]

[1] <https://shafaqdot.com/ar/%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B2%D9%86%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AB%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AB%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%B3%D9%86%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%88%D9%86%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%82-%D9%87%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%81%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%83%D9%88%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%A9>

[2] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-may-25-2023>

[3] https://iq.parliamentdotiq/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B1_%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%86%D8%A9_%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9_%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B9_%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%88%D9%86_%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B2%D9%86%D8%A9_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A9.pdf

[4] <https://www.tasnimnewsdotcom/fa/news/1402/03/22/2909595> ; <https://www.tasnimnewsdotcom/fa/news/1402/03/22/2909774>

[5] <https://www.bonbastdotcom/>

- [6] <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-06-07/ty-article/.premium/major...> ; <https://www.entekhab.ir/fa/news/728961> ; <https://amwaj.media/media-monitor/amid-omani-visit-iran-s-messaging-points-to-transactionalism-with-west> ; <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iran-us-nuclear-near-interim-deal-enrichment-oil-exports> ; <https://www.axios.com/2023/06/09/iran-us-indirect-talks-oman-nuclear-adv...>
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- [14] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-may-19-2023>

Iran Update, June 14, 2023

Iran Update, June 14, 2023

Johanna Moore, Amin Soltani, Andie Parry, Ashka Jhaveri, and Kitaneh Fitzpatrick

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1. CTP has observed several developments that indicate the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) is expanding its military capabilities and broadening its civil role in Iraq along the lines of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) in Iran.
2. Israel Defense Forces (IDF) conducted an airstrike on three Iranian and Syrian Arab Army (SAA) military positions in Damascus, Syria on June 13.
3. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei met with Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) Secretary General Ziyad al-Nakhalah in Tehran on June 14, underscoring Iran's commitment to expanding Axis of Resistance operations in the West Bank.

Iran Update | June 14, 2023



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- 3). TEHRAN - Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei met with PIJ Secretary General Ziyad al-Nakhalah on June 14, underscoring Iran's commitment to expanding Axis of Resistance operations in the West Bank.

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.

CTP has observed several developments that indicate the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) is expanding its military capabilities and broadening its civil role in Iraq along the lines of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in Iran. These developments include drone production and state construction projects.[1] [2] The PMF has some support in the Iraqi government for these new roles. Iraqi President Abdul Latif Rashid's spokesperson, for example, stated on June 14 for the PMF's ninth anniversary that the Iraqi state should support, arm, and equip the PMF in addition to caring for martyr's families.[3]

The PMF announced that it "reverse engineered" the Iranian-made Mohajer-6 drone in Iraq. [4] The Mohajer-6 is a multirole drone with a 200 kilometer range that can carry a multispectral surveillance package and/or guided anti-tank missiles or Ghaem glide bombs.[5] The PMF displayed an Iranian-made Mohajer-6 drone during a military parade in 2021 but did not then claim to have the resources or capabilities to produce it.[6] The PMF, like the IRGC, would need to procure foreign parts to produce the Mohajer-6, as Iranian drones are comprised partly of Western-made components.[7]

Iraqi PMF Chairman Faleh al Fayyadh released a statement announcing that the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)-controlled Muhandis General Company will begin constructing housing for martyrs' families.[8] The Baghdad Municipalities office announced that the city is converting 20,000 plots of agricultural land to residences.[9] The statement did not specify which construction company would develop the land. The Iraqi government previously

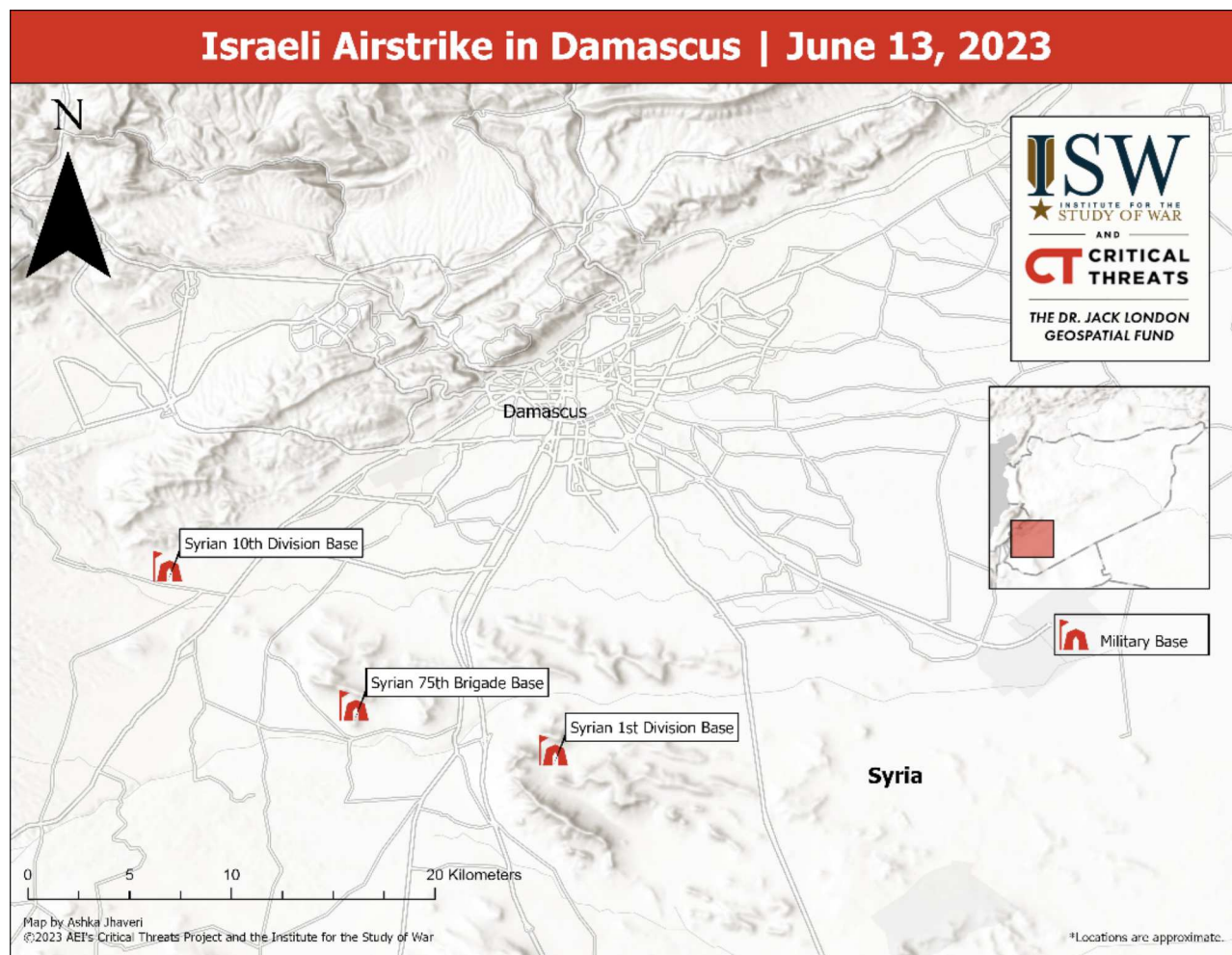
awarded the Muhandis Company with 1.2 million acres of inarable land along the Jordanian and Saudi Arabian border and 67 million USD to plant palm trees.[10] The Muhandis Company is modeled after the IRGC's parastatal-organization Khatam ol Anbiya Construction headquarters, an engineering and development firm that oversees large-scale civil-military construction projects and helps Iran circumvent sanctions.

The PMF also will be the recipient of foreign loans to Iraq through the country's 2023-2025 budget. Independent Iraqi news outlet *Shafaq* released a copy of the Iraqi budget that shows 11 million USD in foreign loans has been allocated to the PMF.[11] Versions of the budget circulating on Iraqi media are missing appendices that would clarify any additional budget allocations for the PMF.[12] A May 2023 draft of the budget showed that the PMF would receive an additional 457 million USD for employee salaries compared to the 2021 budget.[13] CTP will continue to monitor and report as information on the Iraqi 2023-2025 budget becomes available.

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.

Israel Defense Forces (IDF) conducted an airstrike on three Iranian and Syrian Arab Army (SAA) military positions in Damascus, Syria on June 13.[14] Local anti-Syrian regime media *Eye of Euphrates* reported the airstrike destroyed Iranian-affiliated air defense equipment, including an Iranian-made monitoring device and a 23 mm anti-aircraft gun.[15] Israel-based research center *Israel Alma* reported the strike targeted storage facilities for Iranian weapons.[16] Iran transfers conventional air defense weapons to Syria to bolster its military entrenchment and defensive capabilities.[17] The IRGC Quds Force maintains several command centers and weapons storage installations in the vicinity of Damascus, as CTP previously reported.[18]



Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei met with Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) Secretary General Ziyad al-Nakhalah in Tehran on June 14, underscoring Iran's commitment to expanding Axis of Resistance operations in the West Bank. Khamenei praised Palestinian resistance groups for their operations against Israel in the Gaza strip from May 9-13 and emphasized the importance of strengthening groups in the West Bank.[19] Khamenei last met with PIJ leadership in December 2016, during which he similarly praised Palestinian resistance efforts.[20]

The June meeting between Khamenei and Nakhalah took place following regime calls to arm groups in the West Bank and an increase in kinetic activity in the West Bank during the past year. IRGC Commander Major General Hossein Salami previously endorsed arming resistance groups in the West Bank to target Israel from multiple directions in an interview with the Supreme Leader's website in August 2022.[21] The Supreme Leader's website infrequently publishes interviews with senior Iranian officials, making Salami's statements a noteworthy articulation of how the regime seeks to weaken Israel.[22] Iran-backed Palestinian militants recently conducted large-scale rocket attacks into Israel in early April, possibly as part of the larger pattern of escalation between Iran and Israel occurring throughout 2023. It is unclear if the June meeting between Khamenei and Nakhalah is related to the escalation in April, however.[23]

Iran Update, June 15, 2023

Iran Update, June 15, 2023

Ashka Jhaveri, Amin Soltani, Johanna Moore, and Nicholas Carl

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Key Takeaways

1. An unidentified high-ranking Israel Defense Forces (IDF) commander told *Newsweek* that Israel is concerned about Russia transferring Western weapons captured in Ukraine to Iran. Iran will likely attempt to reverse engineer the Western weapons systems to upgrade its own conventional capabilities or develop new ones to use in future conflicts.
2. Western media reported on June 14 that the US and Iran are negotiating an informal nuclear agreement in Oman, citing US, Israeli, and Iranian sources.

Iran Update | June 15, 2023



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An unidentified high-ranking Israel Defense Forces (IDF) commander told *Newsweek* that Israel is concerned about Russia transferring Western weapons captured in Ukraine to Iran.

[1] The IDF officer expressed concerns that Iran is researching Western weapons technology and sending the weapons to its client militias in Lebanon and Palestine.[2] The IDF officer's claims are consistent with previous Western reports. *CNN* previously reported that Russian forces have been capturing US- and NATO-provided weapons and equipment in Ukraine and sending these materials to Iran, notably Javelin anti-tank and Stinger anti-aircraft systems.[3] A Russian military aircraft transported those same systems and a British NLAW anti-tank missile to Tehran on August 20, 2022, according to *Sky News*. [4] This Iranian and Russian defense cooperation is part of a broader and evolving partnership evident in several different fields between Tehran and Moscow, as CTP has previously reported.[5]

Iran will likely attempt to reverse engineer the Western weapons systems to upgrade its own conventional capabilities or develop new ones to use in future conflicts. Iran developed the Touphan anti-tank missile, which is a copy of the American BGM-71 TOW missile, in the 1970s. This demonstrates Iran's interest in using Western military technology to advance its defense industry.[6] Anti-tank and anti-aircraft systems' technology would enhance the combat effectiveness of Iranian and Iranian-backed ground 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.

Western media reported on June 14 that the US and Iran are negotiating an informal nuclear agreement in Oman, citing US, Israeli, and Iranian sources.[7] Iran would reportedly halt production of highly enriched uranium, release Americans held inside Iran, increase its cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency, and refrain from selling ballistic missiles to Russia, according to the reports. The US would, in return, unfreeze Iranian financial assets abroad and refrain from imposing additional sanctions on Iran. Western media claimed that United States has furthermore asked Iran to refrain from attacking US forces in Iraq and Syria. CTP has observed several indicators in recent weeks that Iran may be preparing to resume its attack campaigns in Iraq and Syria to expel US forces.[8]

CTP is considering several hypotheses about how Tehran views the nuclear negotiations and its regional activities.

- 1. Iran is threatening attacks on US forces in Iraq and Syria to build leverage in the nuclear negotiations.** This hypothesis is plausible because Iranian-backed militias in Iraq stopped signaling their intent to attack US forces after IRGC Quds Force Commander Esmail Ghaani visited Iraq on June 8.[9] That his visit was unplanned suggests that he sought to restrain the militias from escalating against US forces in Iraq. Western media reports that the United States has asked Iran to refrain from attacking US forces in the context of nuclear negotiations also indicates the connection between these efforts. Iran has previously received concessions from the West for nuclear negotiations solely by advancing its nuclear program.[10] This is a counter-indicator for the hypothesis. Regime officials threatening that Iran will attack US forces if the United States does not lift nuclear-related sanctions and Iranian proxies resuming their threats to attack US forces should negotiations stall or fail would support this hypothesis.
- 2. Iran is threatening attacks on US forces in Iraq and Syria as part of its campaign to expel US forces and not to gain leverage in nuclear negotiations.** This hypothesis is plausible because Iranian leaders routinely emphasize the importance of forcing US troops from the Middle East. Iran has not ordered attacks on US forces in Syria despite accelerating efforts to build proxy capabilities to do so since last year, however. This is a counter-indicator for this hypothesis. Statements from regime officials that Iran is giving priority to expelling the United States from the Middle East along with indications that Iran is directing proxy attacks would support this hypothesis. 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.

Iranian and Iranian-backed forces have the capability to attack US forces in Iraq and Syria regardless of whether Iranian leaders plan to conduct an imminent campaign. Whether the Iranian regime orders an attack on US forces, therefore, is dependent on the regime's intentions rather than its capabilities.

[1] <https://www.newsweek.com/israel-worries-us-weapons-ukraine-are-ending-ir...>

[2] <https://www.newsweek.com/israel-worries-us-weapons-ukraine-are-ending-ir...>

[3] <https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/10/politics/russia-iran-ukraine-weapons/inde...>

[4] <https://news.sky.com/story/russia-gave-eur140m-and-captured-western-weap...>

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Iran Update, June 16, 2023

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Johanna Moore, Annika Ganzeveld, Andie Parry, and Kitaneh Fitzpatrick

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Note: CTP will not publish an Iran update on June 19 for the Juneteenth holiday. CTP will resume publication on June 20.

Key Takeaways

- 1). Iran may have directed its Iraqi proxies to deescalate their rhetoric against US forces in Iraq. This is consistent with one of CTP's hypotheses, which is that Iran is threatening attacks on US forces in Iraq and Syria to build leverage in the nuclear negotiations.
- 2). Iran and Syria coordinated their policy positions ahead of the next round of Astana talks.
- 3). Iran and Russia discussed Caspian Sea and Volga River transportation routes on June 16. The expansion of these routes could support Iran's transfer of military equipment to Russia.
- 4). Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi stressed Iran, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela's common struggle against "imperialism and domination" on his trip to Latin America between June 12-16, suggesting that Iran may seek to incorporate these countries into its Axis of Resistance.

Iran Update | June 16, 2023



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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 and Syria coordinated their policy positions ahead of the next round of Astana talks. The deputy foreign ministers of Iran, Russia, Syria, and Turkey will meet in Astana, Kazakhstan on June 20 and 21 to negotiate Syrian-Turkish normalization.[1] Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister for Special Affairs Ali Asghar Khaji spoke with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Ayman Soussan about rapprochement efforts in Damascus on June 12.[2] Soussan will be Syria's representative to the quadripartite meeting.[3] Syrian and Iranian state media messaged their unified position ahead of the quadripartite meeting.[4]

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Iran may have directed its Iraqi proxies to deescalate their rhetoric against US forces in Iraq. This is consistent with one of CTP's hypotheses, which is that Iran is threatening attacks on US forces in Iraq and Syria to build leverage in the nuclear negotiations.[5] A post from a Kataib Hezbollah (KH)-backed Telegram channel circulated reporting on June 5 that the United States threatened to target and kill Iraqi proxy leadership if they threaten US interests in Iraq. The post prompted several Iranian-backed proxies—including three new militias—to announce a

campaign to attack and expel US forces from Iraq.[6] Iraqi proxy Telegram channels refocused anti-US rhetoric on June 13 from threats of an attack campaign to criticizing the government for allowing the United States to maintain a presence in Iraq.[7] IRGC-affiliated Telegram channel *Sabreen News* released a statement on June 14 claiming that a decision to stop military action is “a tactic, not a strategy” in peace or in war.[8] The proxies shifting their messaging to Iraqi audiences allows Iran to pursue its objective of expelling the United States from the Middle East without conducting attacks that would undermine nuclear negotiations.[9]

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 and Russia discussed Caspian Sea and Volga River transportation routes on June 16. The expansion of these routes could support Iran's transfer of military equipment to Russia.

The expansion of these routes could support Iran's transfer of military equipment to Russia. Iranian Roads and Urban Development Minister Mehrdad Bazrpash discussed Caspian Sea and Volga River transportation routes with Russian presidential aide Igor Levitin on the sidelines of the 26th International Economic Forum in St. Petersburg, Russia on June 16.[10] Iran has attached importance to developing the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), a transit route connecting Russia and Central Asia to the Persian Gulf via Iran, to bolster Iran’s economy in recent years. The Biden administration published a map on June 9 showing Iranian drone transfers from Iran to Russia through the Caspian Sea.[11] High-ranking Israeli officials have separately expressed concern that Russia is providing Iran with Western weapons captured in Ukraine in exchange for Iran supplying Russia with drones.[12]

Mehrdad Bazrpash previously served as an advisor to former hardline President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.[13] He additionally served as a deputy of the IRGC Cooperative Foundation, an economic conglomerate with extensive influence in Iran’s manufacturing and construction sectors. [14]

Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi stressed Iran, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela’s common struggle against “imperialism and domination” on his trip to Latin America between June 12-16, suggesting that Iran may seek to incorporate these countries into its Axis of

Resistance. Raisi stated that the world order “will turn in favor of the resistance movement and independent countries” during a joint press conference with Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega in Managua, Nicaragua on June 15.[15] Raisi separately stated on June 16 that Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela share the Islamic Revolution’s goals of attaining independence and freedom.[16] Iranian and Latin American officials have previously expressed a desire to jointly resist common enemies, such as the United States. Supreme Leader Military Advisor Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi stated in January 2022 that Cuba, Peru, and Venezuela were “increasing their links to the Axis of Resistance.”[17] Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro separately called for the formation of a united front against the US and Israel and stated that Venezuela is part of the Axis of Resistance during his visit to Tehran in June 2022.[18]

Iran Update, June 21, 2023

Iran Update, June 21, 2023

Amin Soltani, Andie Parry, Annika Ganzeveld and Kitaneh Fitzpatrick

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](#).

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Key Takeaways

- 1. The Syrian regime is leveraging regional normalization with Arab states to fund the reconstruction of Syria's railways, which could block some Iranian efforts to secure revenue from such projects. The reconstruction of Syria's rail infrastructure is likely to facilitate Iranian efforts to generate revenue through greater regional trade, nonetheless.**
- 2. Iran is seeking to leverage arms sales to generate revenue for the Iranian economy.**

Iran Update | June 21, 2023



- 1). DAMASCUS - The Syrian regime is leveraging regional normalization with Arab states to fund the reconstruction of Syria's railways, which could block some Iranian efforts to secure revenue from such projects. The reconstruction of Syria's rail infrastructure is likely to facilitate Iranian efforts to generate revenue through greater regional trade, nonetheless.
- 2). TEHRAN - Iran is seeking to leverage arms sales to generate revenue for the Iranian economy.

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.

The Syrian regime is leveraging regional normalization with Arab states to fund the reconstruction of Syria's railways, which could block some Iranian efforts to secure revenue from such projects. Eight Arab states—Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Palestine, Sudan, and Tunisia—discussed rebuilding Syrian rail infrastructure at the Arab Railway Union conference in Damascus on June 20, the first conference of its kind in 11 years.[1] Arab Economic Unity Council Secretary General Mohammadi Ahmed al-Nani announced at the conference that the council will help Syria receive Arab investment for trade and transportation projects in late 2023.[2] The Arab Economic Unity Council is part of the Arab League. The conference did not result in any memoranda of understanding, agreements, or contracts, however. Agreements or contracts between Syria and the Arab League would conflict with deals the Iranian and Syrian regimes reached in May. Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi signed railroad-related agreements with Syrian President Bashar al Assad during his May 3 - 5 trip to Syria.[3] Raisi separately asserted that Iranian companies are prepared to be the primary providers of reconstruction projects in Syria during an interview with Lebanese Hezbollah-run *Al Mayadeen* on May 2.

The reconstruction of Syria's rail infrastructure is likely to facilitate Iranian efforts to generate revenue through greater regional trade, nonetheless. Iran seeks to build a railway line linking Iran to Syria via Iraq to bolster its domestic economy, create regional economic dependency, and evade international sanctions. Iran and Iraq have agreed to railway projects in April and May 2023 with the stated aim of economic integration.[4] CTP previously assessed that Iranian Roads and Urban Development Minister Mehrdad Bazrpash likely discussed plans with

Syrian officials to establish a rail link between Iran and Syria during Raisi's May trip.[5] Bazrpash stated on May 9 that Iran and Syria are working together to improve Syrian rail infrastructure, and that once the Iran-Iraq section is completed Iran will have a rail route to Syria.[6] Establishing these rail connections will provide Iran with a rail link to the Levant and the Mediterranean Sea, enabling Iran to reap greater trade profits despite sanctions. An Iran-Iraq-Syria railway would also facilitate Iranian and Syrian sanctions evasion through unsanctioned Iraqi ports.

Iran's efforts to establish greater regional trade are part of the Raisi administration's broader "neighborhood policy," which is an economic policy centered on building relations with regional and extraregional states to undermine Western sanctions.[7] These countries cannot individually revive Iran's economy but can cumulatively generate significant revenue for Iran. Iranian officials have met with their counterparts from various countries, including Cuba, Indonesia, Nicaragua, Syria, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Venezuela, in recent months to capitalize on foreign economic opportunities and boost the Iranian economy.[8] Raisi announced that Iran and Venezuela plan to increase bilateral trade to 20 billion dollars during a joint press conference with Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro in Caracas, Venezuela on June 13.[9] Raisi and Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev separately signed a preferential trade agreement on June 18 to increase bilateral trade between Iran and Uzbekistan from roughly one to three billion US dollars annually.[10]

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 seeking to leverage arms sales to generate revenue for the Iranian economy. Armed Forces General Staff Chief Major General Mohammad Bagheri stated on May 31 that Iran will export its military capabilities to "friendly" countries.[11] Bagheri also called on Foreign Affairs Ministry officials to relay Iran's willingness to export its defense capabilities to foreign dignitaries.[12] 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.[13] Other African countries, including Ethiopia, have also expressed an interest in purchasing Iranian-made drones.[14] Iran has established drone manufacturing factories in Tajikistan and Venezuela and is building another in Yelabuga, Russia.[15] These efforts align with the Raisi administration's recent economic diplomacy with several regional and extraregional states to generate revenue through economic trade, as CTP previously assessed.[16]

Iran is unlikely to sell missiles to Russia for use against Ukraine as such a transfer would undermine its ongoing efforts to secure a nuclear deal. Iran is pursuing de-escalatory negotiations with the United States to receive sanctions relief for its struggling economy.[17] Iran also is trying to avoid driving the European states from nuclear negotiations that would include sanctions relief.[18] Iranian missile exports to Russia would escalate tensions with the US and European countries, the latter of which have recently threatened to snapback UN sanctions were Iran to continue high level enrichment and drone sales to Russia.[19]

Iran Update, June 22, 2023

Iran Update, June 22, 2023

Annika Ganzeveld, Amin Soltani, Ashka Jhaveri, Andie Parry, and Nicholas Carl

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Key Takeaways

1. Iranian companies are competing for Syrian electricity infrastructure contracts, likely to generate additional revenue for the Iranian economy and reinforce Iranian ties with the Syrian regime.
2. Druze in the Golan Heights are protesting Israeli plans to build wind turbines, which possibly creates an opportunity for Iran and its Axis of Resistance to generate regional political pressure on Israel.
3. Senior Iranian officials speaking on behalf of the supreme leader called on Iran's intelligence organizations to expand their cooperation against threats to the regime. The meeting is part of an emerging trend that signals Khamenei is concerned with domestic stability and securing the regime.
4. The Raisi administration is continuing its regional economic diplomacy to improve the Iranian economy.

Iran Update | June 22, 2023



- 1). DAMASCUS - Iranian companies are competing for Syrian electricity infrastructure contracts, likely to generate additional revenue for the Iranian economy and reinforce Iranian ties with the Syrian regime.
- 2). GOLAN HEIGHTS - Druze in the Golan Heights are protesting Israeli plans to build wind turbines, which possibly creates an opportunity for Iran and its Axis of Resistance to generate regional political pressure on Israel.
- 3). MASHHAD - Senior Iranian officials speaking on behalf of the supreme leader called on Iran's intelligence organizations to expand their cooperation against threats to the regime. The meeting is part of an emerging trend that signals Khamenei is concerned with domestic stability and securing the regime.
- 4). DOHA, ABU DHABI, MUSCAT, AND KUWAIT CITY - The Raisi administration is continuing its regional economic diplomacy to improve the Iranian economy.

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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 companies are competing for Syrian electricity infrastructure contracts, likely to generate additional revenue for the Iranian economy and reinforce Iranian ties with the Syrian regime. Syrian Electricity Minister Ghassan al Zamil met with Iranian businesspeople to discuss establishing hydroelectric dams in Syria on June 20 in Damascus.[1] This meeting comes after Iranian Energy Minister Ali Akbar Mehrabian announced that Iran will help rehabilitate the Syrian water and electricity industry on May 7.[2] It also follows Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi's visit to Syria from May 3-4, during which he and Syrian President Bashar al Assad signed 15 cooperation agreements and memorandums of understanding that cover oil, energy, transportation, reconstruction, and communications technology.[3] The meeting demonstrates that Iran intends to be the primary provider of reconstruction projects in Syria.[4] Revenue from reconstruction contracts would increase capital flows to Iran, which would help reinvigorate Iran's economy.

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have additionally lobbied European states to ease sanctions and restore relations with the Syrian regime over the past months.[5] Eight Arab states—Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Palestine, Sudan, and Tunisia—also discussed rebuilding Syrian rail infrastructure at the Arab Railway Union conference in Damascus on June 20, the first conference of its kind in 11 years.[6] Iran stands to benefit from the Arab states outreach and investment in Syria in that the lifting of sanctions and rebuilding the country's trade routes would better position Syria to pay Iran for reconstruction projects. Syria was unable to pay Iran for two

thermal electricity plant contracts in March and sought to cover the costs with phosphate. Iran rejected the bartering and the contracts fell through.[7]

The Arab states reconstructing Syria's rail infrastructure also likely would facilitate Iranian efforts to generate revenue through greater trade, as CTP previously assessed.[8] Iran seeks to build a railway line linking Iran to Syria via Iraq to bolster its domestic economy, create regional economic dependency, and evade international sanctions. Iran and Iraq have agreed to railway projects in April and May 2023 with the stated aim of economic integration.[9] Establishing these rail connections will provide Iran with a rail link to the Levant and the Mediterranean Sea, enabling Iran to reap greater trade profits despite sanctions. An Iran-Iraq-Syria railway would also facilitate Iranian and Syrian sanctions evasion through unsanctioned Iraqi ports.

Druze in the Golan Heights are protesting Israeli plans to build wind turbines, which possibly creates an opportunity for Iran and its Axis of Resistance to generate regional political pressure on Israel. Protesters and Israeli police clashed in the Golan Heights on June 20-22 as Israel began work on wind turbines, which resulted in at least 20 injuries.[10] The Syrian Foreign and Expatriates Ministry and Hamas—a US-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO)—condemned Israel's use of force in the territory.[11] Druze residents have protested Israeli activity in the Golan Heights previously, however, such protests rarely result in violence.[12] Israeli National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir met with Druze community leaders on June 22 and decided to pause wind turbine construction for Eid al Adha and continue immediately thereafter. [13] Iranian leaders encouraged conflict between Israel and Palestinian militias during a period of escalation after an Israeli raid on Al Aqsa Mosque in May.[14]

CTP is considering the hypothesis that Iran will exploit the Druze protests to stoke instability against Israel. This hypothesis is plausible because Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) have taken steps to entrench themselves in the Golan Heights and threaten Israel from there.[15] LH in coordination with the IRGC Quds Force established the Golan File unit to build military infrastructure and gather intelligence in southern Syria, for instance.[16] LH has also tried to leverage its allies in the Golan Heights to drive division between Druze communities and assert influence over them.[17] Iran has not messaged any interest in exploiting the Druze protests, however, which makes this hypothesis unlikely. Iranian military officials meeting with regional proxies, such as Hamas and LH, or military planners from groups such as Palestinian Islamic Jihad as the protests continue would be an indication of Iran attempting to exploit the protests.

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.

Senior Iranian officials speaking on behalf of the supreme leader called on Iran's intelligence organizations to expand their cooperation against threats to the regime.[18] Numerous senior political, intelligence, and military officials convened in Mashhad, Khorasan Razavi Province to discuss cooperation between the IRGC Intelligence Organization (IRGC-IO) and Intelligence and Security Ministry (MOIS) on June 15. Supreme Leader Office Chief of Staff Mohammad Mohammadi Golpayegani presented a message from Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, which said that the “lack of understanding” between the IRGC-IO and MOIS is a “weakness.”[19] Supreme Leader Military Office Chief Brigadier General Mohammad Shirazi separately called on the IRGC-IO and MOIS to work together to prevent the “conspiracies and sedition” of Iran's external enemies. The attendees, listed below, signal that Khamenei has given priority to securing the regime given the effects of the Mahsa Amini movement and potential for popular unrest during the upcoming elections.

- Supreme Leader Office Chief of Staff Mohammad Mohammadi Golpayegani
- Supreme Leader Military Office Chief Brigadier General Mohammad Shirazi
- IRGC Intelligence Organization Chief Brigadier General Mohammad Kazemi
- Intelligence and Security Minister Esmail Khatib
- IRGC Commander Major General Hossein Salami

- Supreme National Security Council Secretary Rear Admiral Ali Akbar Ahmadian
- Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi

The meeting is part of an emerging trend that signals Khamenei is concerned with domestic stability and securing the regime. It follows statements from IRGC Intelligence Organization Chief Brigadier General Mohammad Kazemi that accused 18 countries of abetting the Mahsa Amini movement and warned of foreign intervention in Iran's March 2024 parliamentary elections. [20] Kazemi's statements indicate the priority the IRGC-IO is giving to foreign intervention in Iran and the potential for widespread anti-regime protests. That the supreme leader's website published Kazemi's statements indicates that Khamenei is stressing the importance of internal security.[21]

Khamenei likely seeks to overcome historic rivalries between the IRGC-IO and MOIS. [22] Khamenei established the IRGC-IO as a parallel institution to the MOIS in 2009, although the IRGC-IO has increasingly overshadowed the MOIS since then.[23] The IRGC-IO is regarded as the more ideological of the two institutions.[24]

Iran's intelligence agencies are discussing how to confront future sociocultural and political unrest and may extend their cooperation to external threats. Khatib stated during the June 15 meeting that the IRGC-IO and MOIS must develop joint strategies to ensure participation, competition, health, and security in Iran's March 2024 parliamentary elections.[25] Several Iranian officials—including Khamenei—have claimed in recent weeks that Iran's enemies intend to disrupt the elections.[26] Khamenei may thus have ordered the IRGC-IO and MOIS to cooperate, in part, to ensure the parliamentary elections pass smoothly. Iran accused Israel of conducting several acts of sabotage on military and nuclear facilities inside Iran in recent months. Attacks on these facilities would hamper the regime's ability to produce and sell military equipment, such as drones. The regime has also demonstrated heightened concern toward Kurdish opposition groups near Iran's northwestern border with Iraq in recent weeks.[27] Regime-aligned media previously accused Kurdish militants of helping Israel transfer equipment into Iran to strike Iranian facilities. [28]

The Raisi administration is continuing its regional economic diplomacy to improve the Iranian economy. Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian traveled to Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE between June 19 and 22.[29] Abdollahian discussed increasing economic cooperation with his Gulf state counterparts, specifically regarding trade, energy, transportation, banking, communications technology, and private business. Abdollahian's visits are part of the Raisi administration's "neighborhood policy," which is an economic policy centered on building relations with regional and extra-regional states.[30] This neighborhood policy is meant to buoy the Iranian economy despite international sanctions. The policy has failed thus far to prevent the continual deterioration of the economy.

Iran may intend for Abdollahian's outreach to generate interest in economic partnerships with an investment in Iran following a nuclear agreement with the West. Iran has engaged in indirect nuclear negotiations for a limited agreement with the US over the past several weeks.[31] Iran's chief nuclear negotiator Ali Bagheri Kani additionally discussed reviving the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with EU Foreign Affairs Representative Enrique Mora on June 21, signaling the regime's intent to reach a comprehensive agreement.[32] Iran recently engaged in several prisoner exchanges with Western countries, which it intended to clear the path for resuming nuclear negotiations.[33] Iran is also appealing to the Gulf states to invest in the country following a comprehensive agreement that lifts secondary sanctions. Abdollahian, for example, emphasized private sector interaction during a meeting with his Qatari counterpart. CTP will develop and refine this assessment in future updates.

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Iran Update, June 23, 2023

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Key Takeaways

1. The 20th round of Astana talks, which aim to end the Syria conflict, concluded in Astana, Kazakhstan on June 21 without an agreement. Iran and Syria messaged ahead of the forum that their positions are aligned for quadripartite talks, possibly signaling that Iran will back the Assad regime's demand for Turkey's complete withdrawal from Syria as a precondition for future Astana talks.
2. The Iranian rial has appreciated approximately ten percent since May 1, likely in part due to the Raisi administration's economic diplomacy efforts. The Raisi administration's economic diplomacy combined with ongoing nuclear talks may have generated confidence in the future of the Iranian economy, consequently increasing the value of the rial.

Iran Update | June 23, 2023



- 1). ASTANA - The 20th round of Astana talks, which aim to end the Syria conflict, concluded in Astana, Kazakhstan on June 21 without an agreement. Iran and Syria messaged ahead of the forum that their positions are aligned for quadripartite talks, possibly signaling that Iran will back the Assad regime's demand for Turkey's complete withdrawal from Syria as a precondition for future Astana talks.
- 2). TEHRAN - The Iranian rial has appreciated approximately ten percent since May 1, likely in part due to the Raisi administration's economic diplomacy efforts.

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.

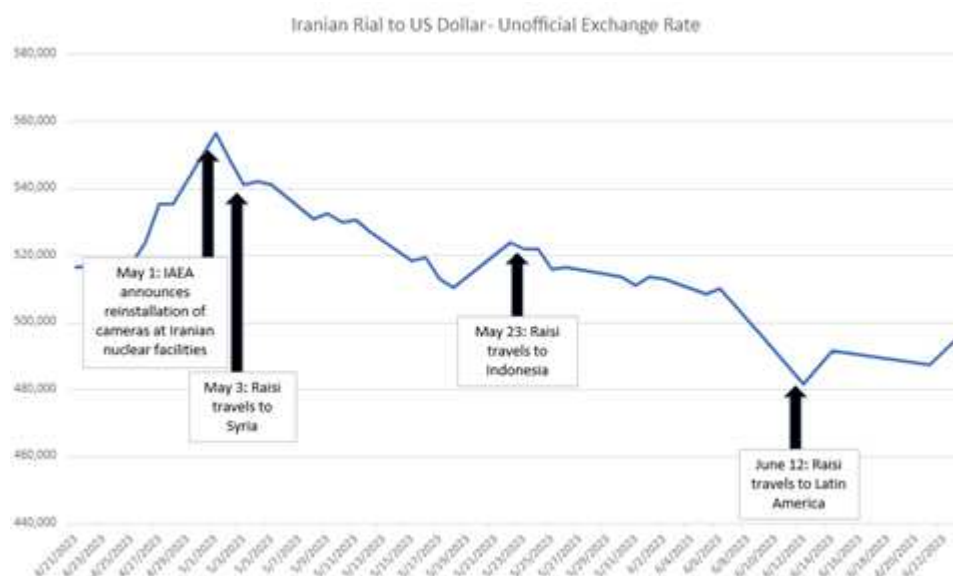
The 20th round of Astana talks, which aim to end the Syria conflict, concluded in Astana, Kazakhstan on June 21 without an agreement. Iran and Syria messaged ahead of the forum that their positions are aligned for quadripartite talks, possibly signaling that Iran will back the Assad regime's demand for Turkey's complete withdrawal from Syria as a precondition for future Astana talks.[1] Iran, Russia, and Turkey—the guarantors of the Astana Process—met for the 20th Astana talk since 2017 and issued nearly identical final statements as the last year's forum, which indicates the Astana negotiations remain stalled.[2] Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Ayman Soussan described total Turkish withdrawal from Syrian territory as the only possible starting point for cooperation and identified Turkish support for Hayat Tahrir as-Sham, an Islamist Syrian opposition group based in Idlib, as unacceptable.[3] The deputy foreign ministers of Iran, Russia, Syria, and Turkey held several separate bilateral and quadripartite meetings on the sidelines of the Astana Process to discuss normalizing relations between Turkey and Syria.[4] The four parties largely agree on the issues of counterterrorism, returning refugees, expelling the United States from Syria, but not the four areas Turkey occupies in northern Syria.

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.

The Iranian rial has appreciated approximately ten percent since May 1, likely in part due to the Raisi administration's economic diplomacy efforts.[5] The value of the rial dropped from around 450,000 to 584,000 against the US dollar in February and fluctuated between 500,000 to 557,000 until early May. The appreciation of the rial began just before President Ebrahim Raisi's widely publicized May 3 trip to Syria, during which high-ranking Iranian and Syrian officials signed 15 economic cooperation agreements.[6] Raisi also traveled to Indonesia on May 23 to boost economic ties with this country.[7] High-ranking Raisi administration and Indonesian officials separately signed 11 energy, pharmaceutical, petrochemical, and technology cooperation agreements in Jakarta.[8] Indonesia's location between the Indian and Pacific Oceans makes it an advantageous partner for Iran to transport oil to China, the main destination of Iranian oil exports, as CTP previously reported.[9] Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian additionally engaged in economic diplomacy with several regional and extraregional countries within this timeframe, including Kuwait, Nicaragua, Oman, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Syria, the UAE, and Venezuela. The Raisi administration implemented some domestic policies as early as February to offset the devaluation of the rial, but CTP cannot link these policies to the appreciation of the currency to those policies.

The appreciation additionally correlates with developments in Iran's nuclear negotiations with the West. The International Atomic Energy Organization announced on May 1—right before the rial began to appreciate--that it began reinstalling cameras in several Iranian nuclear facilities.[10] Numerous Iranian officials, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, have expressed support for a nuclear agreement in recent weeks, further indicating that nuclear negotiations are progressing.[11] The Raisi administration's economic diplomacy combined with ongoing nuclear talks may have generated confidence in the future of the Iranian economy, consequently increasing the value of the rial.



Source: Bonbast.com

Iran is attempting to unify Palestinian resistance groups following recent Israeli strikes against Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza. Several senior regime officials—including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei--met with Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) political leadership in Tehran between June 14 and 22, indicating the regime's increased focus on Palestinian resistance efforts in recent weeks.[12] Khamenei and Raisi emphasized the need for a unified front between Palestinian groups during their meetings with Hamas Political Bureau Chief Esmail Haniyeh and PIJ Secretary General Ziyad Nakhalah on June 19, 20, and 21. Khamenei separately claimed that Israel was attempting to create "divisions and differences" among Palestinian resistance groups. Khamenei's comments follow reports of divisions between Palestinian groups following Israeli decapitation strikes against PIJ leadership on May 9.[13]

Iranian efforts to unify Palestinian resistance groups coincides with recent regime interest in expanding resistance operations in the West Bank. Khamenei emphasized the need to strengthen

West Bank resistance groups during his meeting with Nakhala on June 14 and Haniyeh on June 21. Raisi and Ahmadian echoed Khamenei's call for expanding operations in the West Bank in separate meetings with Nakhala and Haniyeh on June 17 and 19. IRGC Commander Major General Hossein Salami previously endorsed arming resistance groups in the West Bank to target Israel from multiple directions in an interview with the Supreme Leader's website in August 2022, as CTP previously reported.[14]

Anti-regime protests in Sistan and Baluchistan Province increased significantly on June 23, demonstrating that residents remain undeterred from further protest despite the brutal regime crackdown during the Mahsa Amini movement. Residents in at least six cities in Sistan and Baluchistan Province engaged in anti-regime protests after Friday prayers on June 23. [15] Reports of an assassination attempt on prominent Sunni Cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid on June 19 may have resulted in increased protest activity within this province on June 23.[16]

Iran Update, June 26, 2023

Iran Update, June 26, 2023

Annika Ganzeveld, Amin Soltani, Ashka Jhaveri, Johanna Moore, and Kitaneh Fitzpatrick

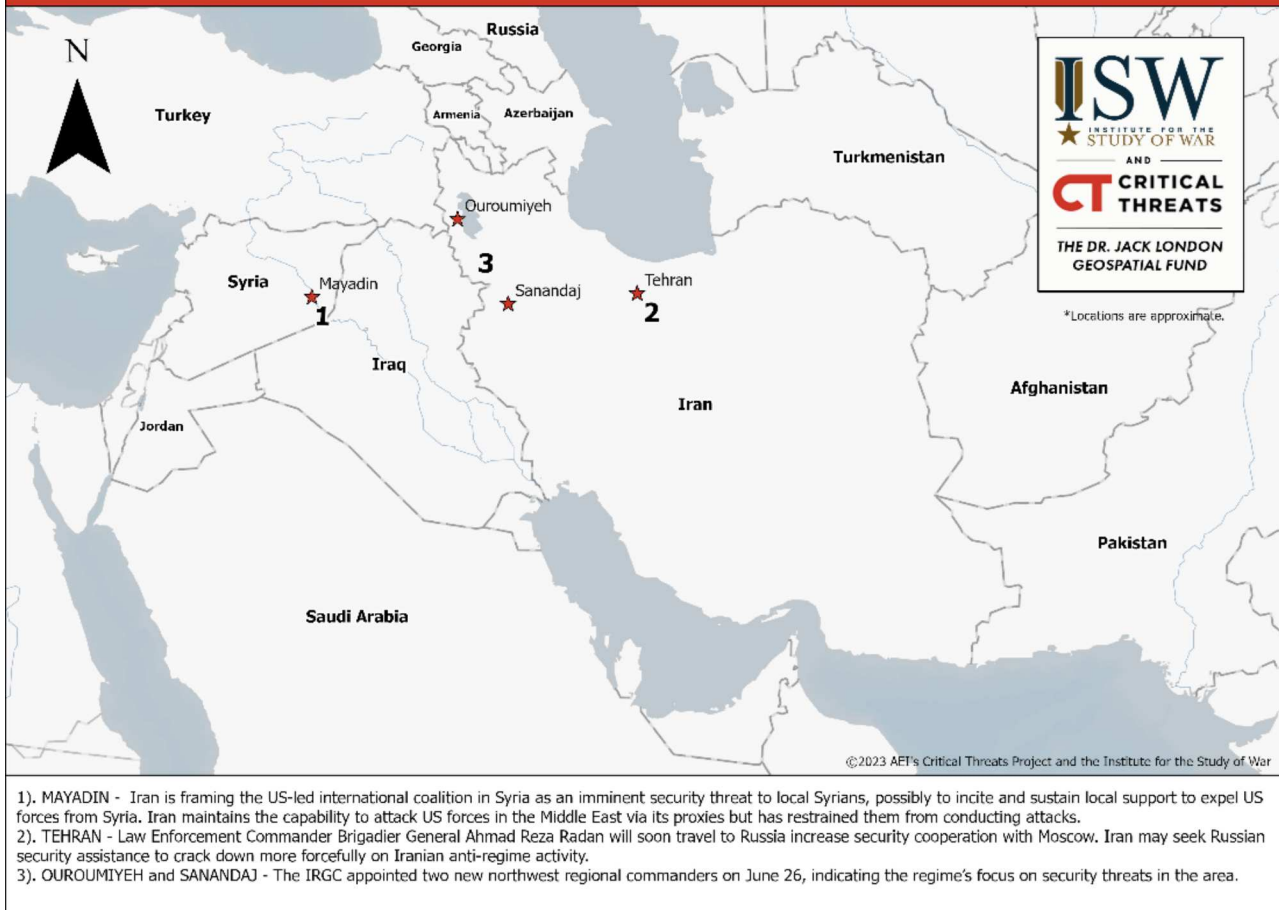
The Iran Update aims to inform national security policy by providing timely, relevant, and independent open-source analysis of developments pertaining to Iran and its Axis of Resistance. This update covers political, military, and economic events and trends that affect the stability and decision-making 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](#).

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Key Takeaways

1. Iran is framing the US-led international coalition in Syria as an imminent security threat to local Syrians, possibly to incite and sustain local support to expel US forces from Syria. Iran maintains the capability to attack US forces in the Middle East via its proxies but has restrained them from conducting attacks.
2. Law Enforcement Commander Brigadier General Ahmad Reza Radan will soon travel to Russia to increase security cooperation with Moscow. Iran may seek Russian security assistance to crack down more forcefully on Iranian anti-regime activity.
3. The IRGC appointed two new northwest regional commanders on June 26, indicating the regime's focus on security threats in the area.

Iran Update | June 26, 2023



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 framing the US-led international coalition in Syria as an imminent security threat to local Syrians, possibly to incite and sustain local support to expel US forces from Syria. The coalition conducts counter-ISIS operations in Syria and is occasionally the target of Iranian-backed militia attacks.[1] Iranian-backed militias held a military parade in Mayadin City on June 24 to respond to a rumor that the US-led international coalition was preparing to liberate Albu Kamal and Mayadin cities from the Syrian regime.[2] The military parade suggests that Iran is attempting to frame its military presence in Syria to locals as necessary to counter US attacks. Iran has attempted to recruit local Syrians to create a grassroots resistance to expel the United States from Syria. [3] Iranian state media also reported that US forces brought a convoy of weapons and logistical supplies on June 25 to positions along the Euphrates River in Syrian Democratic Forces-held territory.[4] IRGC-affiliated *Tasnim News Agency* and Iranian state-run *Al Alam* circulated the report on their Arabic-language Twitter accounts, which suggests Iran sought to reach regional audiences.

Iran maintains the capability to attack US forces in the Middle East via its proxies but has restrained them from conducting attacks. Iranian-backed militias have the necessary capabilities to conduct an attack on US forces, as CTP showed in a list of indicators for an Iranian-directed attack on US forces.[5] CTP has not observed indications since May 18 that Iran is preparing to direct an imminent attack on US forces, however. Iranian-backed militias threatened to attack US forces in Iraq from June 1 to June 8, but stopped issuing the threats after IRGC Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani made an unannounced visit to Baghdad on June 8.

[6] That the militias stopped threatening to attack US forces suggests Ghaani directed the Iranian proxies to tone down their rhetoric and deescalate vis-à-vis the United States. This timeline of events is inconsistent with what CTP would expect to see following orders from Iranian leadership to conduct an attack.

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.

Law Enforcement Commander Brigadier General Ahmad Reza Radan will soon travel to Russia to increase security cooperation with Moscow. Iranian media reported on June 26 that Radan will travel to Russia on an unspecified date to observe the Russian police's methods for confronting organized crime.[7] Radan will also sign a memorandum of understanding with Russian security officials to increase Russo-Iranian cooperation in combatting terrorism and human and drug trafficking. Iranian law enforcement commanders rarely travel abroad, and Radan has not traveled abroad since becoming Law Enforcement Commander in January 2023. Former Law Enforcement Commander Brigadier General Hossein Ashtari only made one foreign trip to Iraq during his eight-year tenure, for example.[8] The announcement of Radan's trip follows Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's June 23-24 armed rebellion against the Russian Ministry of Defense.[9] The timing of this announcement suggests that Radan is traveling to Russia to help Russian President Vladimir Putin maintain internal security. Radan previously traveled to Damascus, Syria as law enforcement deputy commander in 2011 to support Syrian security services' crackdown against the Syrian people.[10]

Iran may seek Russian security assistance to crack down more forcefully on Iranian anti-regime activity. Radan stated on June 26 that the Law Enforcement Command (LEC) will "forcefully" confront "norm breakers," a term Iranian security officials frequently use to describe individuals who participate in acts of anti-regime defiance, including unveiled women.[11] President Ebrahim Raisi separately stated on June 25 that the regime's efforts to "reduce social harms" have been "insufficient." [12] The regime recently began implementing a "smart" approach for enforcing mandatory veiling in mid-April.[13] This approach uses advanced technologies, such as facial-recognizing cameras, to identify unveiled women without physically confronting them. Several Iranians recently told the *BBC* that these smart technologies are inaccurate, however, with several long-haired men reporting that they received hijab warning messages after traffic cameras mistook them for unveiled women.[14] The Wall Street Journal reported on March 27 that Russia is providing Iran with advanced surveillance software.[15]

The Iranian regime may also seek Russian security assistance to confront potential unrest related to the March 2024 parliamentary elections. Regime officials have expressed increased concern over the potential for the upcoming elections to generate unrest in recent weeks. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei stated that Iran's enemies have "already launched their artillery to destroy" the March 2024 elections during a speech commemorating former Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini on June 4.[16] Intelligence and Security Minister Esmail Khatib separately called on the IRGC Intelligence Organization and Intelligence and Security Ministry to develop joint strategies to ensure participation, competition, health, and security in the upcoming elections on June 15.[17]

IRGC Commander Major General Hossein Salami appointed two new regional IRGC commanders in Iran's northwestern provinces on June 26, indicating the regime's focus on security threats in the area. Salami appointed Brigadier General Ali Akbar Pourjamshidian as Hamzeh Seyyed ol Shohada Operational Base Commander.[18] The Hamzeh Seyyed ol Shohada Operational Base is based in Ouroumiyeh, West Azerbaijan province and is responsible for the West Azerbaijan and Kurdistan provinces. The base regularly deploys forces to suppress internal unrest and conduct operations against anti-regime militants inside Iran and Iraqi Kurdistan Region.[19] Pourjamshidian replaced Brigadier General Mohammad Taghi Ossanolou, who had held the position since 2011.[20] Pourjamshidian is a suitable successor to Ossanolou and has held several IRGC staff and command positions prior to his appointment, most recently as IRGC Ground Forces Deputy Coordinator, a role he's held since 2016. Salami also appointed Brigadier General

Amanullah Gashtasbi as the 22nd Beyt ol Moghadas Operational Division Commander. The Beyt ol Moghadas Operational Division is based in Sanandaj, Kurdistan province, where it has quelled unrest and attacked Kurdish anti-regime militants.

These IRGC command changes coincide with recent regime concern over Kurdish anti-regime militancy in the West Azerbaijan and Kurdistan provinces and Israeli threats the regime perceives in Iraqi Kurdistan. Salami stated during Pourjamshidian's appointment ceremony that Israel is promoting Kurdish separatism inside Iran.[21] The IRGC deployed the Seyyed ol Shohada and Beyt ol Moghadas forces to conduct operations against anti-regime Kurdish militant as recently as May 30 to June 16.[22] Senior IRGC Ground Forces commanders and security officials previously threatened to confront anti-regime actors and "terrorists" along Iran's western border with Iraq in recent weeks.[23] Iranian officials routinely use the term "terrorist" to refer to Kurdish separatist groups in Iraqi Kurdistan. Iranian media reported that Kurdish groups in Iraq had supplied and transported drone components for an Israeli attack on a Defense Ministry facility in Esfahan. [24] Intelligence Minister Esmail Khatib also claimed in January that state security services arrested those who had attempted to engage in destabilizing activities inside Iran.[25]

Iran Update, June 27, 2023

Iran Update, June 27, 2023

Andie Parry, Amin Soltani, and Nicholas Carl

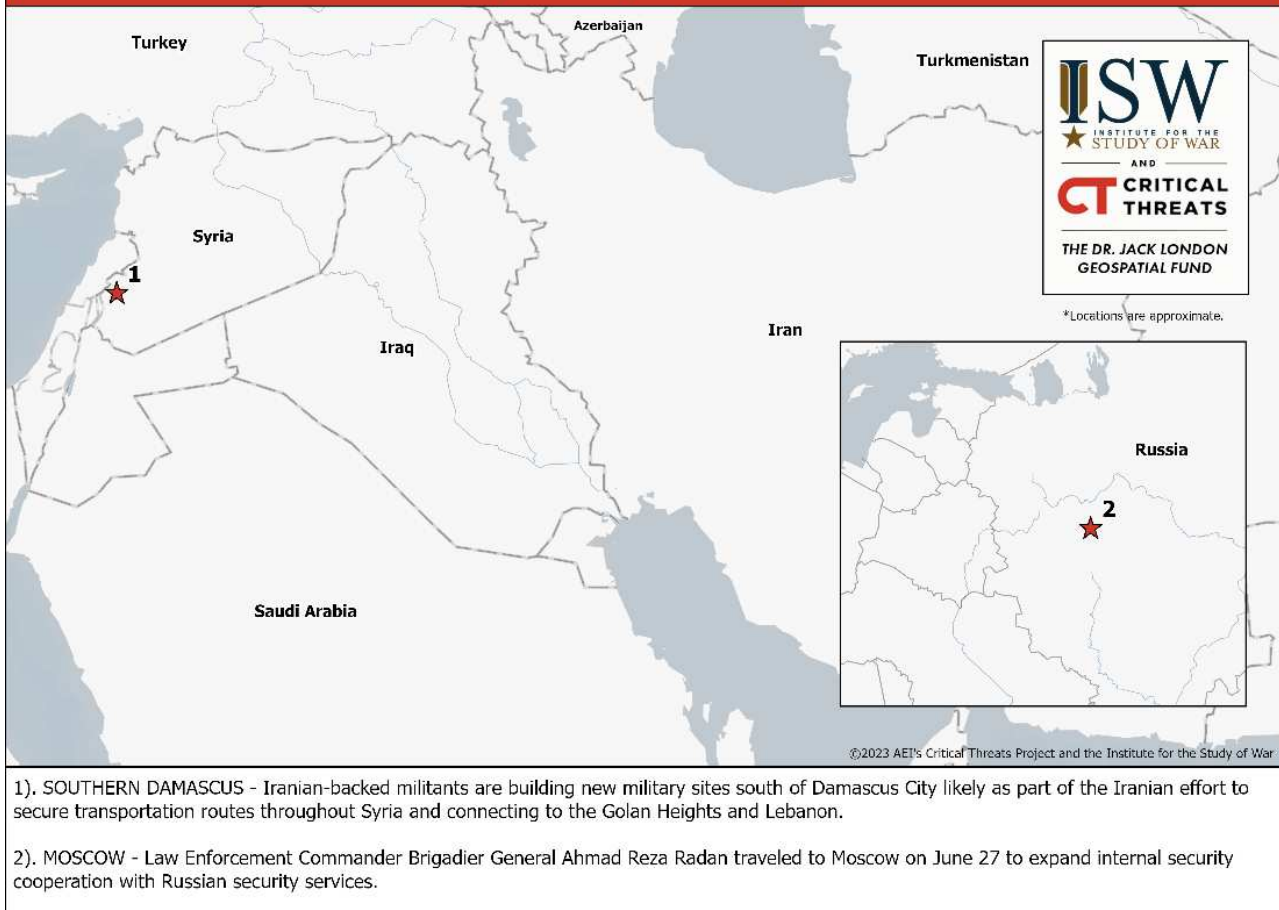
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Key Takeaways

1. Iranian-backed militants are building new military sites south of Damascus City likely as part of the Iranian effort to secure transportation routes throughout Syria and connecting to the Golan Heights and Lebanon.
2. Law Enforcement Commander Brigadier General Ahmad Reza Radan traveled to Moscow on June 27 to expand internal security cooperation with Russian security services.

Iran Update | June 27, 2023



Iranian Activities in the Levant

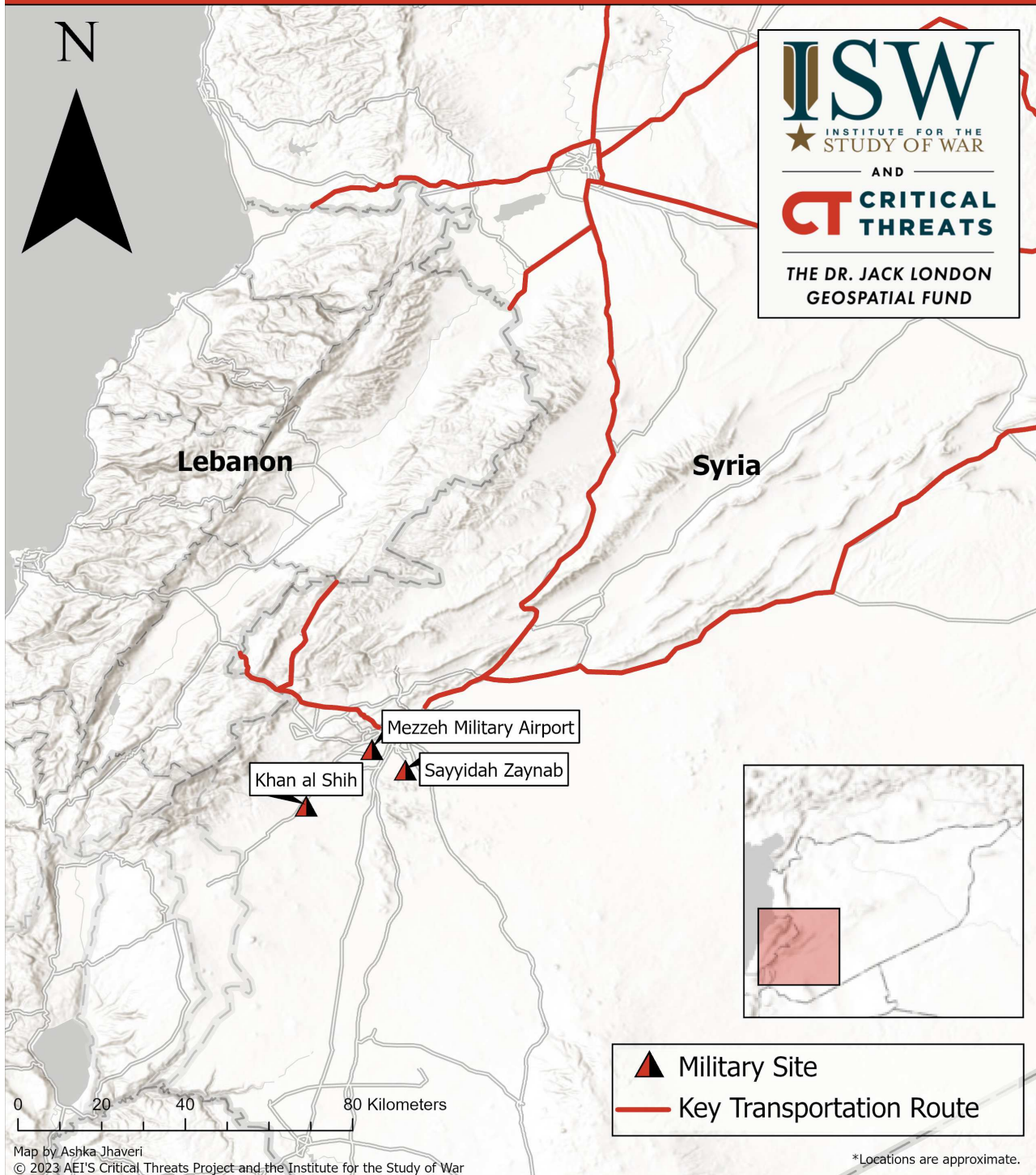
This section covers Iranian efforts to consolidate and expand Tehran's economic, military, and political influence throughout the Levant and especially in Syria. This section examines some of the many campaigns that Iran is pursuing to achieve this strategic objective. CTP will update and refine our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

Iranian-backed militants are building new military sites south of Damascus City likely as part of the Iranian effort to secure transportation routes throughout Syria and connecting to the Golan Heights and Lebanon. The Iranian-backed Iraqi Imam Hussein Brigades seized land to build a military headquarters and storage center in Khan al Shih in southern Damascus in mid-June. [1] Lebanese Hezbollah also seized land for a headquarters and underground storage facility about 12 miles away, near the Mezzeh Military Airport, on June 17.[2] Both locations are on key transportation routes to the Golan Heights and Lebanon, which Iran uses to build its military presence around Israel and enhance its capability to deter Israel.[3] The sites also are adjacent to two locations that Israel struck during its early 2023 air campaign that aimed to disrupt Iranian transportation networks and destroy several air defense facilities.[4] This suggests that Iran was using the sites to facilitate the transfer of military materiel to these areas around the Israeli border.

Iranian-backed militants establishing new military sites in Syria and the Damascus area is part of a larger trend. Iranian-backed militants also established a military headquarters and barracks in the vicinity of Sayyidah Zaynab in southern Damascus on May 17.[5] A leader of the Iranian-backed militia Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba separately disclosed to *Al-Araby al Jadeed* on June 12 that Iraqi militias remain in southern Syria despite regional normalization between the Assad regime and Arab states.[6] This demonstrates that Iran and Iranian-backed militants have continued building military sites in Syria despite the Arab League demanding in May the end of all foreign militia activity in Syria.[7]

New Iranian Military Sites On Key Routes

May 17-June 17, 2023



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.

Law Enforcement Commander Brigadier General Ahmad Reza Radan traveled to Moscow on June 27 to expand internal security cooperation with Russian security services. Radan plans to meet with officials from Russia's National Guard, Police Operations Management Center, and Moscow Traffic Control Center. Radan will sign cooperation agreements on combating terrorism, smuggling, narcotics, and human trafficking, according to Iranian state media. Radan

also stated that the two countries will share equipment to these ends but provided no further details.
[8]

Radan may seek to acquire additional Russian support to enhance Iranian domestic surveillance capabilities. Doing so would be consistent with Radan's previously stated intent to leverage advanced technologies to promote internal security.[9] Western media reported on March 27 that Russia is already helping Iran to develop advanced digital surveillance capabilities.[10] Iranian officials have stated that their efforts to widely enforce the mandatory hijab law have failed thus far and indicated interest in adopting a more confrontational approach. Radan issued a directive to the LEC on February 6 to use advanced technologies for enhancing internal security.[11] He elaborated on the directive on April 15 in an announcement that the LEC will begin using advanced surveillance capabilities to widely enforce the mandatory hijab law and reiterated his commitment to "forcefully" confront anti-regime defiance, including unveiling, the day before his trip to Moscow.[12] President Ebrahim Raisi similarly expressed concern on June 25 that the regime's efforts to "reduce social harms" have been "insufficient." [13]

Law enforcement cooperation between Iran and Russia would add a new dimension to the growing Russo-Iranian security partnership. The partnership has largely centered on arms sales from Russia to Iran, although this has changed since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. Iran has provided drones for the Russian war effort in Ukraine and has begun building a drone manufacturing facility in Russia.[14] Iran expects advanced Russian fighter jets and air defense systems in return for its support for the Russian war effort, though these sales have not yet materialized despite Iranian media reporting.[15] The partnership also has included joint naval exercises since 2014.[16]

Iran Update, June 29, 2023

Iran Update, June 29, 2023

Ashka Jhaveri and Amin Soltani

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](#).

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Key Takeaways

1. The Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and Russian forces conducted airstrikes on rebel positions in Idlib Province between June 25 and 27. CTP is considering the hypothesis that Iran will commit forces to Idlib Province to support the SAA and Russian forces.
2. The Iranian regime is seeking harsher enforcement of mandatory veiling and may block banking and IT services for unveiled women, as well as imprison those who do not comply with the veiling laws.

Iran Update | June 29, 2023



- 1). IDLIB - The Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and Russian forces conducted airstrikes on rebel positions in Idlib Province between June 25 and 27. CTP is considering the hypothesis that Iran will commit forces to Idlib Province to support the SAA and Russian forces.
- 2). TEHRAN - The Iranian regime is seeking harsher enforcement of mandatory veiling and may block banking and IT services for unveiled women, as well as imprison those who do not comply with the veiling laws.

Iranian Activities in Syria

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.

The Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and Russian forces conducted airstrikes on rebel positions in Idlib Province between June 25 and 27. The head of the Russian Reconciliation Center, which is affiliated with the Russian Ministry of Defense in Syria, said the strikes responded to militants in Idlib Province that launched drone strikes into Syrian regime-held territory on June 22 and 23. [1] He said on June 29 that the airstrikes will continue until the “elimination of militants.” [2] The UK-based *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights* noted that the airstrikes are the deadliest in 2023 and resulted in at least 22 casualties. [3] Hundreds of thousands of Syrian civilians and militants relocated to Idlib Province during the Syrian civil war, which makes it the last rebel stronghold in Syria. [4] The US-designated terrorist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham established an Islamist government in Idlib Province in 2017. [5] Russia and Turkey agreed to a series of de-escalation agreements in 2017 and 2018 to stall a broader Turkish military incursion into Idlib Province. [6] However, Russian forces and Iranian-backed militants supported the Syrian President Bashar al Assad regime in launching an offensive to retake Idlib Province in 2019, which concluded in a ceasefire agreement in 2020. [7] Since the ceasefire, Russian forces have conducted several airstrikes on rebel positions which rarely resulted in further escalation. [8]

CTP is considering the hypothesis that Iran will commit forces to Idlib Province to support the SAA and Russian forces. This hypothesis is plausible because Iran deployed 400–800 Afghan Shia Fatemiyoun militants to Idlib Province in 2020 to aid the Syrian regime in fighting rebels. [9] HTS arrested several militants that were part of a Lebanese Hezbollah-directed sleeper cell in Idlib Province on June 26, which suggests Iranian-backed militants remain in the province. [10] This

hypothesis is unlikely because Iran has primarily been deploying militants to Deir ez Zor Province and constructing military facilities in Damascus. This indicates Iran has given priority to eastern and southern Syria, as CTP has previously reported.[11] Indicators that would support the hypothesis include: 1) Iranian-backed militias deploying to areas in the vicinity of Idlib Province; 2) Iran messaging support for the Syrian regime's offensive; and 3) the Syrian regime asking Iran for military support in Idlib Province. An implication of this hypothesized event would be conflict between Iran and Turkey in Idlib Province. Such a conflict occurred in 2020, when Turkish Armed Forces killed Lebanese Hezbollah militants in Idlib Province during a Syrian-led offensive.[12]

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.

The Iranian regime is seeking harsher enforcement of mandatory veiling and may block banking and IT services for unveiled women, as well as imprison those who do not comply with the veiling laws. President Ebrahim Raisi stressed on June 26 the need for “seriously” increasing costs on those who do not conform to the regime's veiling standards.[13] Law Enforcement (LEC) Commander Brigadier General Ahmad Reza Radan similarly vowed on June 26 to “forcefully” implement veiling standards.[14] Hardline parliamentarians have previously suggested blocking the national identification cards of unveiled women, barring them from banking services, and cutting off their mobile and internet services.[15] The parliament was scheduled to approve the judiciary's proposed mandatory veiling law on June 20 to address these issues, but has not done so.[16] The proposed law includes punishments that range from warnings and fines to imprisonment for women who do not abide by the mandatory veiling law. It is unclear whether Iran's hardline parliament seeks to rewrite the bill to include harsher enforcement measures.

The recent emphasis on a more forceful approach follows criticisms from hardline officials and media over the inadequacy of the present veiling enforcement plan.[17] The LEC has been using surveillance technology to identify and issue warnings to unveiled women since April 15 in addition to employing other soft-enforcement mechanisms.[18] The LEC has also impounded cars, sealed stores and restaurants, and denied unveiled women access to public spaces. Women continue to defy the veiling standards, however, indicating the plan's failure to compel compliance. [19] Regime officials have expressed concerns that a failure to strictly enforce veiling will multiply noncompliance during the summer heat.[20] Raisi acknowledged these enforcement measures have been insufficient on June 25. [21] Other regime officials have expressed concerns that certain law enforcement officials have neglected to enforce veiling policies.

The regime seeks to address noncompliance with the hijab law because it views violations as a threat to regime stability. The Iranian clerical establishment has previously stressed the centrality of the hijab to the regime's core identity and has warned that continued unveiling would cause the downfall of the regime.[22] The regime has historically viewed enforced veiling as one of the foundations of its Islamic identity and authority.[23] The pro-regime loyalists in the state security services and population would view the failure to enforce veiling as a betrayal of the 1979 Islamic Revolution's ideal and of the martyrs who sacrificed themselves during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War to preserve those ideals.[24]

[1] <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/drone-strike-hits-syrian-presi...>; <https://www.facebook.com/mod.gov.sy/videos/%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%A...> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/25/at-least-nine-killed-in-russian-air-strikes-in-syrias-idlib#:~:text=At%20least%20nine%20civilians%20were,group%20of%20emergency%20rescue%20volunteers.>; <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/russia-strike-kills-6-al-...>

[2] <https://npasyria.com/en/100342>

[3] <https://www.syriahr.com/en/302774/>; <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-06-26/russian-strikes-kill-13-in-rebel-...>

- [4] <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/crisis-idlib>
- [5] <https://ofac.treasury.gov/recent-actions/20180531>
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<https://iranwire.com/en/women/115651-a-close-look-at-irans-gruesome-hija...>

Iran Update, June 30, 2023

Iran Update, June 30, 2023

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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 launched 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.

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Key Takeaways

1. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force (IRGC QF) and Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) established a headquarters in eastern Syria, probably to coordinate arms transfers, intelligence collection, and training for Iranian-backed militants in Syria.

2. The Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and Russian forces conducted air strikes on rebel groups in Idlib Province shortly after the failure of the latest normalization and Astana Talks, and Iran may send Iranian-backed militants to in northwestern Syria to support the pro-regime operations.
3. Iran's worsening water crisis is increasing food insecurity and internal migration, which will likely fuel greater popular unrest in the coming years.



Iranian Activities in Syria

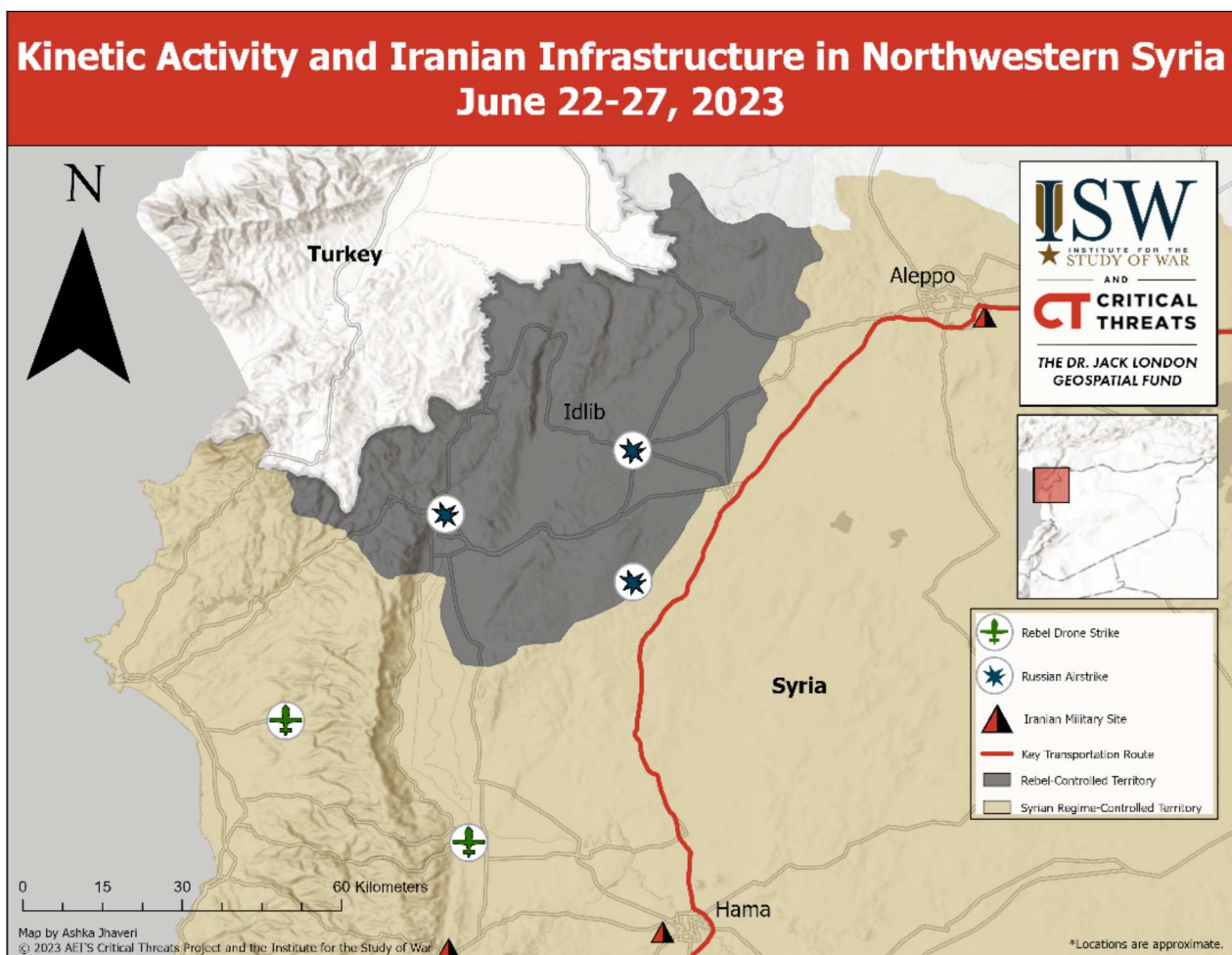
This section covers Iranian efforts to consolidate and expand Tehran's economic, military, and political influence throughout the Levant especially in Syria. This section examines some of the many campaigns that Iran is pursuing to achieve this strategic objective. CTP will update and refine our assessments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

The Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and Russian forces conducted air strikes on rebel groups in Idlib Province shortly after the failure of the latest normalization and Astana Talks, and Iran may send Iranian-backed militants to northwestern Syria to support the pro-regime operations. Several SAA units deployed to Aleppo and Idlib Province contact lines armed with heavily artillery and rocket launchers between June 19 and 21 as normalization talks took place between Syria and Turkey.[1] The SAA and Russian forces conducted airstrikes on rebel positions in Idlib Province between June 25 and 27.[2] Iran has an interest in retaking Idlib because the rebels remain a threat to Assad's rule and instability threatens transportation routes between Iranian weapon caches and forces.[3] Iranian deployments and new military infrastructure suggests Iran has given priority to securing Damascus and Deir ez Zor Provinces, however, as CTP previously assessed.[4] Iran's closest established military sites to Idlib are in Aleppo and Hama Provinces. The arrest of a Lebanese Hezbollah cell in Idlib Province on June 26 suggests Iran maintains a small presence in Idlib Province.[5]

CTP is considering two scenarios in which Iran would change its force disposition in Idlib Province and northwestern Syria. The scenarios encompass the recent SAA and Russian airstrikes, as well as how regional developments could prompt changes in Iran's decision-making and prioritization of regions in Syria.

1. *The SAA conducts a ground offensive against rebels in Idlib Province with Russian air support.* In this scenario, Iran would commit forces to Idlib Province to support the SAA and Russian forces.[6] This is plausible because Iran deployed 400-800 Afghan Shia Fatemiyoun militants to Idlib Province in 2020 during a Syrian regime campaign.[7] Indications that would support this scenario include Assad requesting Iran send militias to Idlib Province to support the ground offensive and the establishment of joint headquarters or operations centers in Idlib Province.

2. *Turkey conducts a ground incursion following the failure of Syria-Turkey normalization.* In this scenario, a major Turkish incursion would jeopardize Iran's access to regime-held positions in Saraqib along the key transportation route on the M-5 highway from Aleppo to Hama. An incursion would also present a threat to Shia population centers in Nubl and Zahra. Iran has used such threats to justify militia deployments in Syria, including to defend Nubl and Zahra, throughout the Syria conflict.[8] A Turkish incursion would force Iran to deprioritize counterterrorism and anti-ISIS campaigns in Deir ez Zor and Raqqa, as well as campaigns to expel US forces.



Russian forces conducted an additional airstrike in the vicinity of Jabal al-Arbaeen, which CTP was unable to locate.[9]

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force (IRGC QF) and Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) established a headquarters in eastern Syria, probably to coordinate arms transfers, intelligence collection,

and training for Iranian-backed militants in Syria. IRGC QF

Commander for Mayadin Hajj Maysar and LH Deir ez Zor Province

Commander Hajj Siraj coordinated the purchase of a home in Mayadin to serve as a joint headquarters.[10] Iranian-backed militants installed cameras, a private internet network and electricity lines to the headquarters in a densely populated area of Mayadin on June 29. The local anti-Syrian regime outlet *Eye of Euphrates* reported Iran and LH chose the location in Mayadin to evade Israeli targeting. IRGC QF and LH officials frequently meet in Deir ez Zor Province to discuss operational security and coordinate weapons and military equipment shipments. [11] Hajj Maysar accompanied Iranian and LH signals intelligence experts to a military site on the outskirts of Mayadin on May 31.[12]

The establishment of the joint headquarters in Mayadin, along with other Iranian-affiliated construction efforts that CTP has reported on in Deir ez Zor, suggests Iran is giving priority of their resources to facilitating command-level activity in eastern Syria. The LH-run and US-sanctioned construction company Jihad al Binaa began building a permanent Iranian military base including 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.[13] A senior IRGC official in al Mayadin ordered Jihad al Binaa to excavate land for weapons warehouses and tunnels in eastern al Mayadin on June 8.[14]

The establishment of the joint IRGC QF-LH headquarters is part of a larger Iranian effort to build military infrastructure across Syria to advance Iranian objectives in the country. Iranian-backed militias seized land to build a military headquarters and storage center in southern Damascus in mid-June.[15] Iranian-backed militants established a military headquarters and barracks in the vicinity of Sayyidah Zaynab in southern Damascus on May 17. LH also seized land for a headquarters and underground storage facility near the Mezzeh Military Airport, on June 17. Iranian commanders and Iranian-backed militants use the infrastructure facilitate the transfer of weapons from Iran and Iraq to Iranian-backed forces in eastern Syria and LH in the Golan Heights and Lebanon.[16]

Lebanese Hezbollah has almost doubled their air defense arsenal over the past five years in Lebanon.

Israeli media outlet *Maariv Online* reported that Israel Defense Forces are monitoring LH's acceleration of acquiring air defense systems based primarily on new Iranian systems within the framework of restricting Lebanese airspace. [17] Tehran has long sought to establish an integrated air defense capabilities for its Axis of Resistance in the Levant.[18] Iran facilitated the transfer of advanced military equipment to upgrade air defense systems during February 5 earthquake relief efforts, for example. [19] Iranian senior military officials have also made public comments about deploying Iranian-made air defense systems to Syria.[20] CTP will follow up next week with the implications of an Iranian-orchestrated integrated air defense system in the Levant.

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.

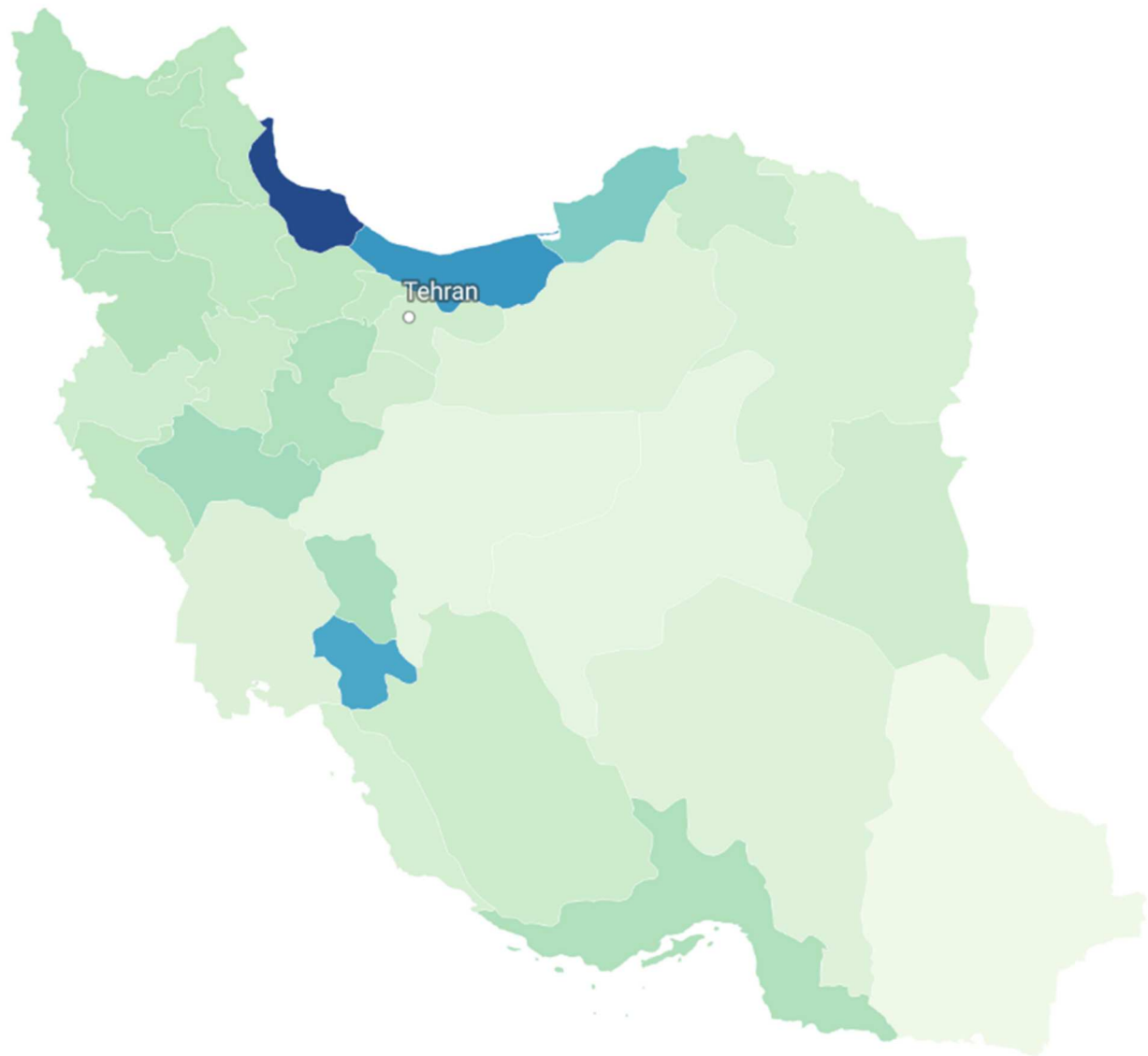
Iran's worsening water crisis is increasing food insecurity and internal migration, which will likely fuel greater popular unrest in the coming years.

Iran's annual average temperature increased nearly six percent between March 2020-2022, while Iran's annual average precipitation decreased nearly 25 percent during this same period.

[21] These climatic changes, along with other factors such as the IRGC's prolific dam construction and diminishing underground water reserves, are aggravating Iran's long-standing water crisis. Water scarcity has caused three water protests in Kerman, Sistan and Baluchistan, and Yazd Provinces in the past month alone.[22]

Average Annual Precipitation in Iran by Province (in Millimeters) | March 2021-2022

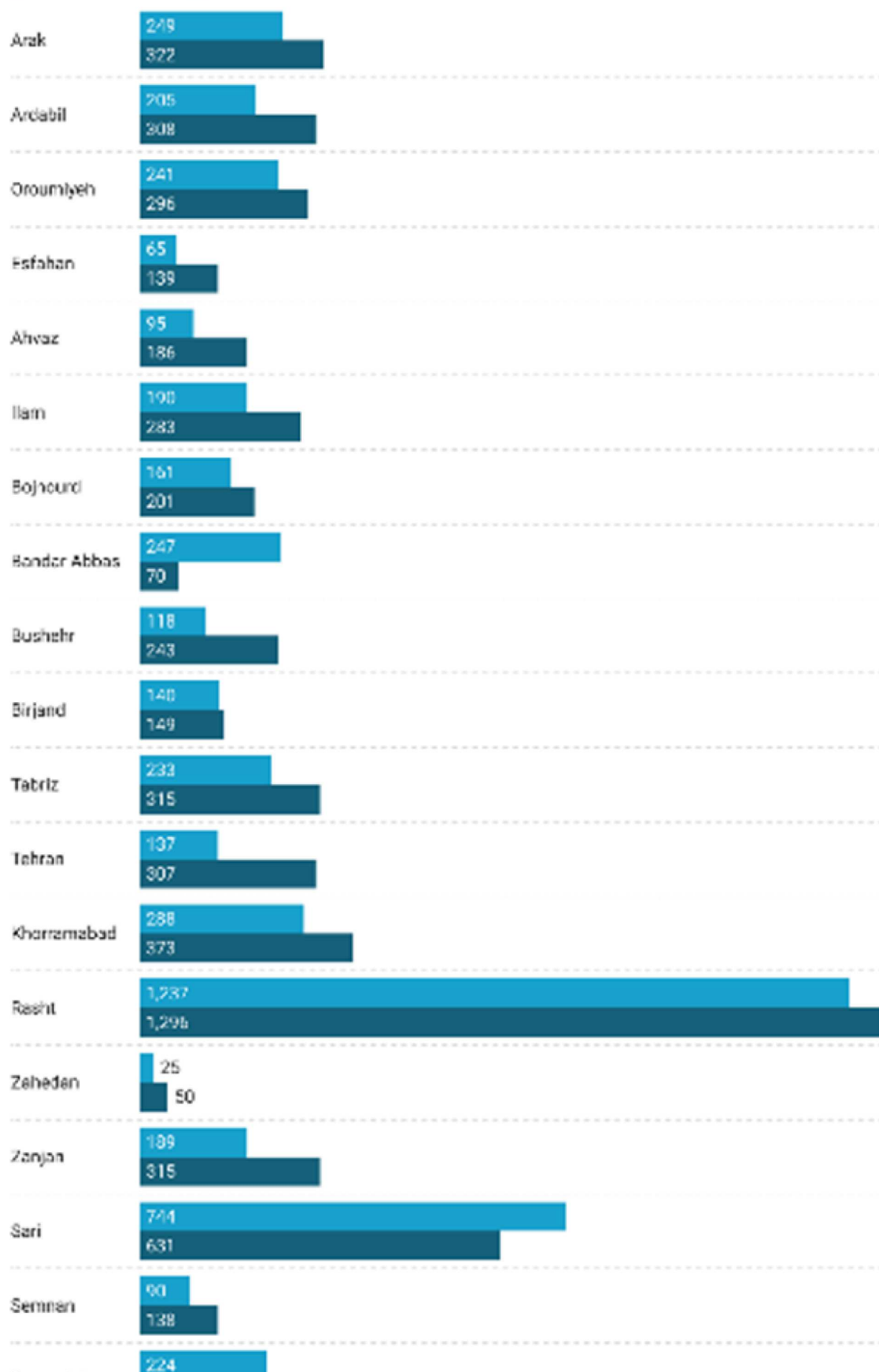
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Map: AEI's Critical Threats Project • Source: Statistical Center of Iran • Created with Datawrapper

Average Precipitation in Iran by Province (Millimeters) March 2020-2021 vs. March 2021-2022

■ March 2020-2021 ■ March 2021-2022



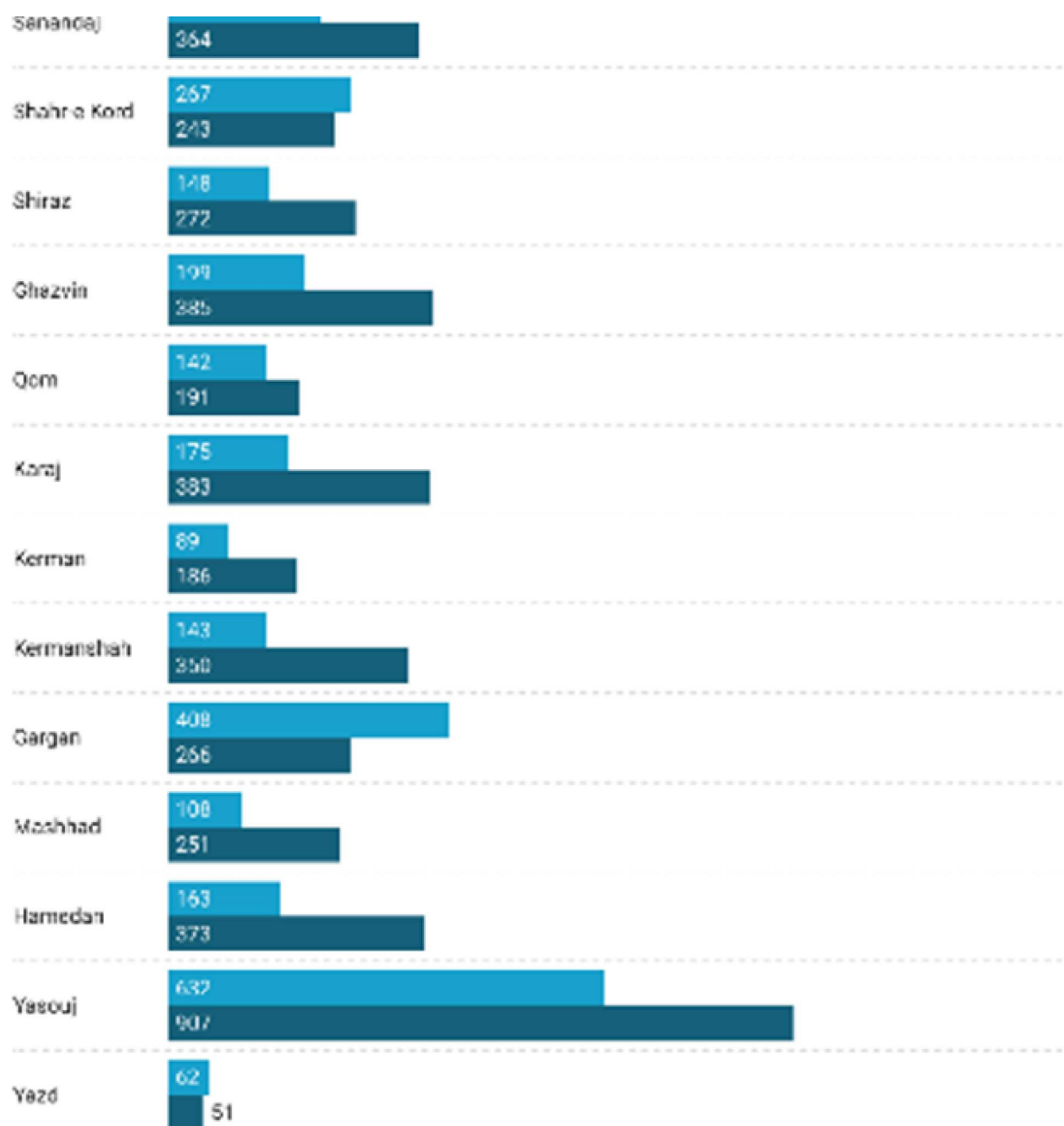
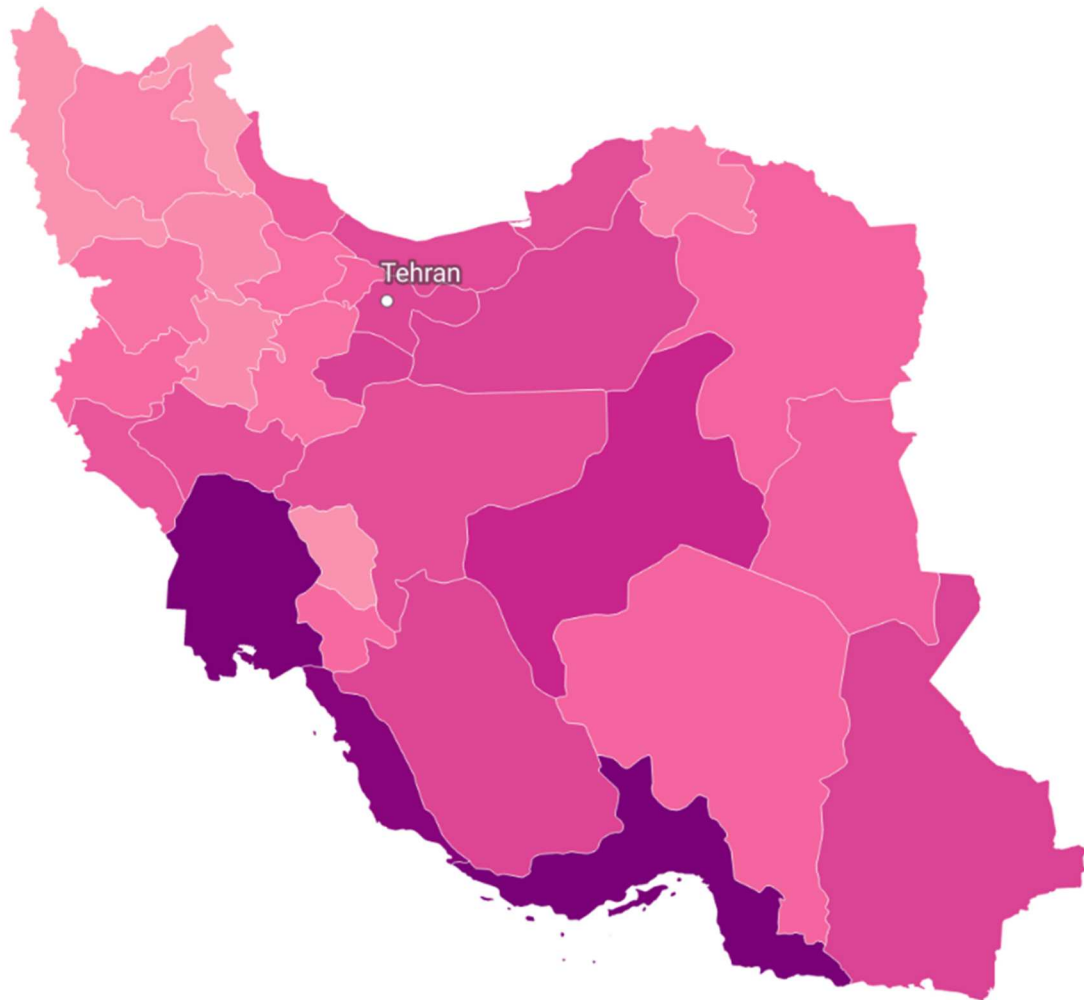


Chart: AEI's Critical Threats Project - Source: Statistical Center of Iran - Created with Datawrapper

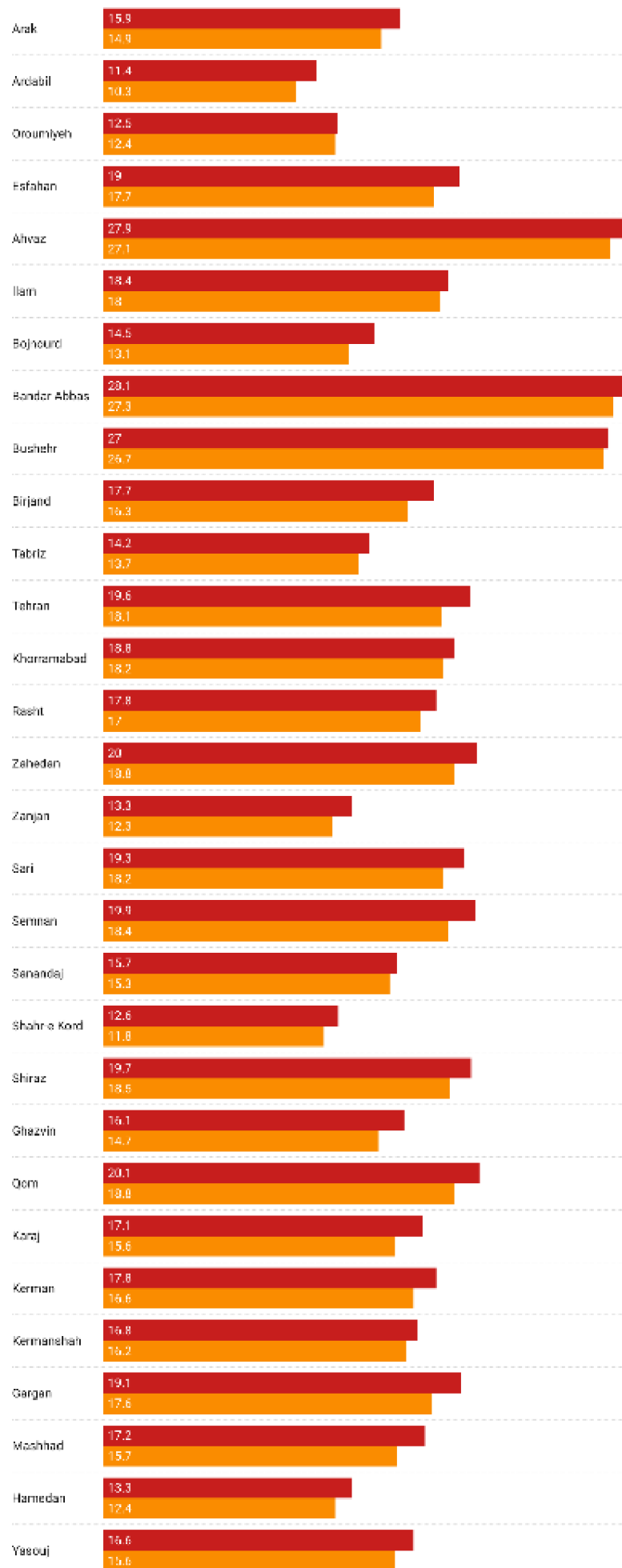
Average Annual Temperature in Iran by Province (in Degrees Celsius) | March 2021-2022



Map: AEI's Critical Threats Project • Source: Statistical Center of Iran • Created with Datawrapper

Average Temperature in Iran by Province (Degrees Celsius) March 2020-2021 vs. March 2021-2022

March 2020-2021 March 2021-2022



Iran's water crisis is aggravating food insecurity. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization calculated that the percentage of Iranians living in households classified as “moderately or severely food insecure” increased from 40.6 in 2018 to 42.4 in 2022.[23] Iranian officials have voiced concerns over the detrimental impact of Iran's water crisis on the country's ability to produce food in recent weeks. Zabol, Sistan and Baluchistan Province Agricultural Jihad Director Hassan Nouzri stated on May 8, 2023, that wheat production in this city has decreased 95 percent compared to last year due to drought. [24] Zabol is located near the Hamoun-e Helmand, a wetland which 80 percent of Sistan and Baluchistan residents rely on to sustain a living, but which has nearly completely dried up in recent years.[25] Khuzestan Province Agricultural Research, Education, and Natural Resources Center head Bahram Anderzian similarly stated on April 18, 2023, that Khuzestan Province's agricultural production has decreased by 25 percent in the past year due to severe water shortages.[26]

Iran's water crisis is also increasing internal displacement. Climate migration in Iran increased 10 percent between 2000 and 2020. [27] Iranian media and officials have urgently discussed climate migration in recent weeks, moreover. Iranian newspaper *Donya-yeh Eghtesad* reported in January 2023 that climate migration in Iran “has become more serious than ever.”[28] Tabriz University faculty member Mehdi Zarghami separately stated on June 21 that 10,000 families were forced to emigrate from Zabol, Sistan and Baluchistan Province last year due to the drying up of the Helmand River.[29] The Iran Migration Observatory additionally included a section on climate migration for the first time in its 2022 annual report, indicating that this issue is becoming more important in Iran.

Increasing food insecurity and internal displacement will likely increase popular unrest in the coming years, threatening regime stability. The drying up of wetlands and rivers will limit Iranians' access

to clean drinking water and decrease food production, which will in turn harm many Iranians' livelihoods. Esfahan Province residents—including many farmers—previously protested the drying up of the Zayandeh Roud River in November 2021.[30] Increased internal migration will additionally place an immense burden on large cities such as Tehran and change Iran's social landscape. Large parts of Tehran experienced water cuts for several days in mid-June, which suggests that large cities sometimes have difficulty providing basic services to their citizens. [31] Increased internal migration would further strain cities' capacities to meet citizens' needs. Internal migration has historically caused unrest, moreover. Many protesters who participated in the December 2017-January 2018 Dey Protests had emigrated to the outskirts and suburbs of Iranian cities after facing economic hardships in their hometowns, for example.[32] Water scarcity is an issue that impacts all Iranians. This issue therefore poses a graver risk to the regime because, unlike previous protest movements which were largely limited to certain parts of the population, water protests could encompass numerous demographics.

