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Iran Update, July 5, 2023

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

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.

Key Takeaways

1. Palestinian militants thanked Iran and the broader Axis of Resistance for their help during the recent Israel Defense Forces (IDF) raid in Jenin and likely will receive Iranian assistance to rebuild the military capabilities the IDF degraded.
2. Iranian officials inflated the amount of Iranian funds that a recent US sanctions waiver for Iraq will provide, possibly to inspire confidence in Iran's economy and currency. News of similar waivers for Iraq has coincided with short-term improvements for the Iranian economy.
3. Iran became a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization on July 4, which may enable it to circumvent sanctions through non-US dollar financial transactions with other SCO countries. Iran could benefit militarily from its membership in the SCO through participation in counterterrorism and naval exercises.
4. Iran attempted to seize two US oil tankers in the Strait on July 5, likely to assert its control over the Strait of Hormuz given the recent US naval deployments to the Persian Gulf. Iran also likely sought to pressure the US to accede to Iran's demands in the nuclear negotiations.

Iran Update | July 5, 2023



1. JENIN - Palestinian militants thanked Iran and the broader Axis of Resistance for their help during the recent Israel Defense Forces (IDF) raid in Jenin and likely will receive Iranian assistance to rebuild the military capabilities the IDF degraded.
2. BAGHDAD - Iranian officials inflated the amount of Iranian funds that a recent US sanctions waiver for Iraq will provide, possibly to inspire confidence in Iran's economy and currency. News of similar waivers for Iraq has coincided with short-term improvements for the Iranian economy.
3. TEHRAN - Iran became a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization on July 4, which may enable it to circumvent sanctions through non-US dollar financial transactions with other SCO countries. Iran could benefit militarily from its membership in the SCO through participation in counterterrorism and naval exercises.
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Iranian Activities in the Levant

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

Palestinian militants thanked Iran and the broader Axis of Resistance for their help during the recent Israel Defense Forces (IDF) raid in Jenin and likely will receive Iranian assistance to rebuild the military capabilities the IDF degraded.[1] The IDF conducted airstrikes, drone strikes and a ground incursion with more than 1,000 soldiers in a two-day raid on Palestinian militant sites in Jenin, West Bank.[2] The IDF claimed the raid destroyed several Palestinian command-and-control centers, six explosives laboratories with more than 14 improvised explosive devices, and weapons caches with small arms and explosive materials.[3] Israeli fighter jets also hit a Hamas weapons manufacturing site in Gaza in response to rocket fire into Israel.[4] Israeli military officials framed the Jenin operation as a strategic and preventive measure to degrade Palestinian militant capabilities.[5] Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Commander Hossein Salami stated the IRGC intends to increasingly focus on directing ground operations against Israel from the West Bank during an August 2022 interview.[6] Supreme Leader Khamenei, President Ebrahim Raisi, and Supreme National Security Council Secretary Ali Akbar Ahmadian recently reiterated the West Bank is the key to defeating Israel during separate meetings with Palestinian militia leaders in Tehran from June 14 to 23.[7]

Iran and Palestinian militants are messaging a coordinated resistance to Israel and may expand their joint military operations. The Joint Operations Room of the Palestinian Factions issued a statement during the Jenin operation on July 3 promising a united response.[8] Hamas also released a statement on July 5 affirming the strength of joint field coordination in Jenin and

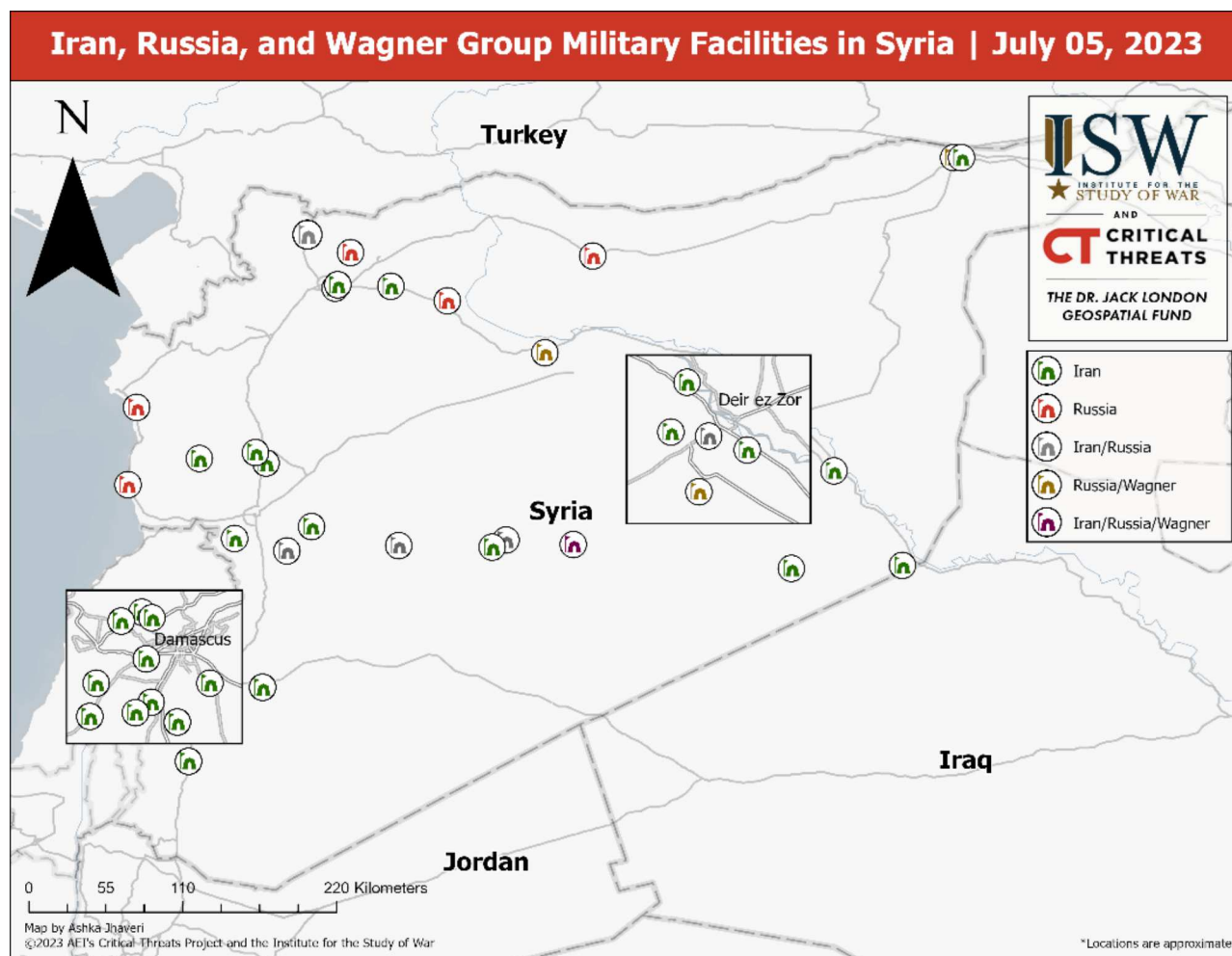
celebrating the defeat of Israel in the Jenin raid.[9] The Palestinian Islamic Jihad militant wing Saraya al Quds Brigade also thanked Iran and the broader Axis of Resistance for its help during the Jenin clashes.[10] IRGC Quds Force Commander Esmail Ghaani also stated on July 5 that Palestinian militias have “never been stronger in their history” and are conducting roughly 30 operations per day in the West Bank.[11] Iran’s Nour News Agency published an interview with a spokesperson from Fatah, a Palestinian group independent of Iran, who stated Israel should expect unified and coherent action by Palestinian groups in Jenin. [12] This demonstrates Iran is messaging the importance of a coordinated Palestinian resistance. The Palestinian operations support Iran’s objectives to maintain persistent pressure on Israel through military encirclement and to facilitate attacks on Israel while maintaining strategic depth.

Military Sites Methodology

ISW added a new layer to its interactive map with the Iranian, Russian, and Wagner Group military facilities in Syria that ISW assesses are active as of July 5, 2023. Each facility comprises one or more of the following types of infrastructure: air defense, airfield, barracks, headquarters, training center, and/or weapons storage. ISW assigned a confidence level to each assessed facility based on the available open-source reporting and information. ISW considered the credibility and quality of the reporting and referred to open-source satellite imagery to corroborate the locations and infrastructure types when possible.

The data layer does not represent an exhaustive list of all Iranian and Russian military facilities in Syria.

ISW included the facilities for which open-source information permits at least low confidence assessments. The data layer does not show locations that Iran and Russia have vacated, such as the facilities Russian forces occupied before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.



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 officials inflated the amount of Iranian funds that a recent US sanctions waiver for Iraq will provide, possibly to inspire confidence in Iran's economy and currency.

US Department of State Spokesperson Mathew Miller acknowledged that the US had approved \$2.7 billion of Iranian assets to be used for humanitarian and non-sanctioned goods during a press briefing on June 13.[13] The head of the Iran-Iraq Joint Chamber of Commerce, Yahya al-e Eshagh, mischaracterized the amount on July 3 in stating that the Trade Bank of Iraq (TBI) promised to release \$10 billion in Iranian funds for purchasing non-sanctioned goods.[14] Eshagh made this claim during an interview with the Iranian state-news outlet *Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA)*. [15] *IRNA* separately quoted Economic and Financial Affairs Minister Ehsan Khandouzi on July 5 stating that the Central Bank of Iraq will release \$10 billion to Iran as payment for Iraqi electricity and gas debts in addition to non-sanctioned goods. [16] *IRNA* published both articles in Persian but not English, which indicates its intended audience was in Iran. News of similar waivers for Iraq has coincided with short-term improvements for the Iranian economy. The Iranian rial appreciated approximately 4.6 percent on June 10 following an announcement from Eshagh that the US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken had approved a sanctions waiver for \$2.7 billion to pay gas and electricity debts to Iran.[17] CTP recorded several spikes in protests in Iran between February and April 2023 that focused on worsening economic conditions, including high inflation and the rial's depreciation.[18]

Eshagh announced on July 3 that Iran plans to invest \$300 billion in Iraqi power plants and refineries through 2024.[19] The Iranian regime has awarded such contracts to its parastatal organization Khatam ol Anbia, the Iraqi Popular Mobilization front company Muhandis Company, and the Lebanese Hezbollah owned Jihad al Binaa on a preferential basis to fund its proxies and place profits directly into the regime. Some Iranian private companies, such as Parse Baydar, have competed for electrical infrastructure contracts in Syria.[20] Iran could award some contracts to such companies in Iraq. [21]

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 became a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) on July 4, which may enable it to circumvent sanctions through non-US dollar financial transactions with other SCO countries.[22] The SCO is a regional security, economic, and political organization comprised of China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. [23] Iran has sought an alternative financial messaging to Belgium-based SWIFT ever since SWIFT disconnected Iran from their platform in 2018.[24] Iran and Russia connected their interbank communication and transfer systems on January 30, 2023 and Iranian regime-affiliated news outlets have supported linking Iran's SEPAM financial messaging system with China, India, and Russia's financial messaging systems in recent months.[25] Iranian officials view the SCO as a means of advancing Iran's efforts to compensate for Iran's dwindling foreign currency reserves by conducting economic exchanges in local currencies. Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi called on SCO members to abandon the US dollar in financial transactions during his speech at the 23rd SCO Summit on July 4.[26] Raisi did not specify how Iran will promote de-dollarization as an SCO member, however. Foreign Affairs Ministry Economic Diplomacy Deputy Mehdi Safari previously proposed in June 2022 that the SCO should use a single currency, much like how the European Union uses the euro.[27] Regime-affiliated news outlets have additionally expressed support for linking Iran's SEPAM financial messaging system with China, India, and Russia's financial messaging systems in recent months.

Iran also seeks to use its SCO membership to accelerate the construction of various regional transit corridors, which will likely confer economic benefits through new sources of

revenue. President Ebrahim Raisi reiterated Iran's support for the development of the International North-South Transit Corridor (INSTC), Chabahar Port, and China's Belt and Road initiative during his June 4 speech. Raisi also stressed Iran's ability to connect the landlocked Central Asian countries to open water. Completing these transportation infrastructure projects would increase Iran's capital inflows by giving it access to new markets, as well as enabling it to charge foreign countries transit through Iranian territory.[28] State media previously reported that INSTC will generate \$20 billion in annual revenue for Iran upon the completion of the project.[29] Iran faces numerous obstacles in completing the transportation projects, such as securing reliable sources of funding, however.[30] Regime officials also have signed numerous multilateral and bilateral agreements in recent years without making progress toward completing the INSTC, for example.[31]

Iran could benefit militarily from its membership in the SCO through participation in counterterrorism and naval exercises. The SCO regularly holds military exercises to increase SCO member states' readiness to confront regional threats, such as extremist groups in Afghanistan. Iranian Defense Minister Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Ashtiani previously expressed Iran's readiness to exchange intelligence with SCO member states to combat terrorism during a SCO defense ministers meeting in New Delhi, India on April 28.[32] Ashtiani also expressed support for participating in joint naval exercises with SCO member states. Iran has conducted three joint naval exercises with the SCO's two most powerful members—China and Russia—since 2019.[33]

Iran attempted to seize two US oil tankers in the Strait of Hormuz on July 5, likely to assert its control over the Strait given the recent US naval deployments to the Persian Gulf. Two Artesh Navy vessels attempted to seize the Marshall Islands-flagged TRF Moss and Bahamian-flagged oil tanker Richmond Voyager.[34] Iranian naval personnel also fired small arms at the Richmond Voyager. The US Fifth Fleet deployed the USS McFaul destroyer, an MQ-9 Reaper drone, and a P-8 Poseidon patrol plane to prevent the seizures, at which point the Iranian naval vessels withdrew from the tankers. These types of Iranian reactions to US naval deployments are part of a trend in Iranian efforts to challenge the US presence in the Persian Gulf. The US Navy announced on April 8 that it deployed the USS Florida guided-missile submarine to the Middle East.[35] Artesh Navy Commander Rear Admiral Shahram Irani claimed that an Iranian Fateh-class submarine forced the USS Florida to surface as it attempted to traverse the Strait of Hormuz on April 20.[36] The US Fifth Fleet denied Irani's claims, calling them "disinformation" in a tweet on April 20.[37] The US Department of Defense also announced on May 12 that it would bolster the Fifth Fleet's defensive posture in the Persian Gulf after Iran seized three international vessels in the Strait of Hormuz between April 27 and May 12. [38] IRGC Commander Major General Hossein Salami threatened to expel US forces from the region and reiterated Iran's commitment to protecting maritime trade on the same day.[39] The IRGC Navy conducted unprofessional and unsafe maneuvers near a US naval ship in the Persian Gulf on May 19.[40]

Iran also likely sought to pressure the US to accede to Iran's demands in the nuclear negotiations. Recent media reports and statements by American, European, and Iranian officials suggest that the nuclear negotiations between the West and Iran have been unsuccessful due to Iranian defiance and certain Iranian demands.[41] Iran aimed to release frozen assets and secure modest sanctions relief for its struggling economy by negotiating with the US and EU. [42] Disrupting commercial traffic around the straits imposes economic costs on international actors, such as the US and Europe, which Tehran sees as leverage for pressuring the West into providing sanctions relief.[43] Iran has previously seized oil tankers and cargo ships transiting the Strait of Hormuz to extract concessions in nuclear negotiations. Iran seized the Marshall-Islands flagged Maersk Tigris cargo ship in 2015, for example, as diplomatic tensions grew over providing sanctions relief to Tehran through what would become the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).[44] The US was responsible for protecting Marshall Islands flagged vessels at that time. Iran also seized several Western tankers in 2019 to alarm European allies and pressure the US to return to the JCPOA and lift sanctions after the US withdrew from the accord.[45]

Iran Update, July 6, 2023

Iran Update, July 6, 2023

Annika Ganzeveld, Ashka Jhaveri, and Andie Parry

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Key Takeaways

1. Iran bolstered Lebanese Hezbollah's (LH's) air defense capabilities likely to establish a deterrent in Lebanon against Israel.
2. Palestinian militant groups called for a cohesive strategy to counter Israel and may expand their joint military operation against Israel.
3. Iranian diaspora media, citing Russian investigative sources, claimed on July 6 that Russia has paid Iran nearly 900 million US dollars for Iranian drone technology.

Iran Update | July 6, 2023



- 1). BEIRUT - Iran bolstered Lebanese Hezbollah's (LH's) air defense capabilities likely to establish a deterrent in Lebanon against Israel.
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Iranian Activities in the Levant

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

Iran bolstered Lebanese Hezbollah's (LH's) air defense capabilities likely to establish a deterrent in Lebanon against Israel. Israel-based media *Maariv Online* reported on June 30 that LH has almost doubled the amount of air defense systems in Lebanon under the auspices of Iran during the past five years.[1] The group uses the air defense system to restrict the airspace around Lebanon from Israeli aircraft. Tehran has long sought to establish integrated air defense capabilities for its Axis of Resistance in the Levant, as CTP previously reported.[2] LH Secretary General Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah has similarly messaged interest in having anti-aircraft weapons confront Israel. Nasrallah said in a televised address that he is willing to bring air defense systems from Iran to confront Israel in 2019.[3] LH accelerated its intensification of developing its air defenses following an Israeli drone strike on a missile precision facility in Beirut in 2019, according to *Maariv Online*. [4]

Iran's regional strategy relies on arming a responsive security network in the Levant. Iran's support for and direction of Palestinian militant ground operations against Israel from the West Bank degrades Israel Defense Forces capabilities and further distances Iran's home front from Israeli retaliatory actions, as CTP previously reported.[5] Iran has been transferring conventional air defense weapons to eastern Syria, training forces there to use the weapons, and improving operational security along ground lines of control from Iraq deeper into Syria since at least mid-March.[6] Securing the ground lines enables Iranian-backed militias to facilitate weapons shipments to Iran's militias in the Levant. LH units facilitate the transfer of weapons from Syria to

Lebanon and give priority to developing the military capabilities of its Southern Command along the Israeli border.[7]

LH's understanding of Israeli deterrence and air defense arsenal possibly strengthens its confidence in its ability to degrade Israeli military capabilities. Israeli media reported that the IDF Intelligence Directorate's Research Division issued a warning stating Israel's deterrence against its enemies is eroding on April 4.[8] Nasrallah claimed during the Gaza-Israel clashes in mid-May that Israel's deterrence has collapsed on all fronts.[9] IRGC-affiliated *Tasnim News Agency* recirculated Nasrallah's speech and emphasized that Israel will try to restore its deterrence effect.[10] LH-affiliated *Al Manar* has claimed LH activity, such as shooting down an Israeli drone on June 27 and setting up tents in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights on July 3, demonstrates LH's understanding of Israeli deterrence and retaliation patterns.[11] The Axis of Resistance's efforts to saturate the region with air defense systems is an effort to restrict Israeli aircrafts from conducting reconnaissance activity and attacks that threaten Iranian military posture.[12] Southern Lebanon is one of multiple fronts from which Iran threatens Israel while maintaining strategic depth.[13]

Palestinian militant groups called for a cohesive strategy to counter Israel and may expand their joint military operation against Israel. Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) released a joint statement on July 6 to praise resistance groups for a unified response to the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) raid in Jenin and called on all Palestinian Faction secretary generals to form a comprehensive national plan to confront Israel.[14] The joint statement from PIJ and Hamas is part of an ongoing trend of calls and efforts from Palestinian militant groups to coordinate their attempts to counter what they perceive as an Israeli campaign to divide and weaken their actions. Palestinian militant groups have presented a united front against Israel, in part through the Joint Operations Room of the Palestinian Factions that they formed in 2017 in Gaza.[15] Groups affiliated with the joint operations room launched about 1,500 rockets from Gaza into Israel in retaliation for Israel's targeting of several senior PIJ operatives in the May 2023 Gaza conflict.[16] A Hamas military official claimed on June 12 that Palestinian resistance groups had outmaneuvered Israel by unifying in a joint operations room.[17] The joint operations room also called for a unified response against Israel's operation in Jenin in a statement on July 3.[18] IRGC Quds Force Commander Esmail Ghaani claimed on July 5 that the Palestinian militias had demonstrated unity through the nearly 30 attacks a day on Israel.[19]

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Iranian diaspora media, citing Russian investigative sources, claimed on July 6 that Russia has paid Iran nearly 900 million US dollars for Iranian drone technology.[20] CTP cannot independently verify this claim nor determine the credibility of the Russian sources. The report of Russian monetary payments for Iranian drones differs from other sources that asserted Iran would receive Russian military equipment, including Su-35 fighter jets, in return for supplying Russia with drones.[21] Iranian Defense Minister Mohammad Reza Ashtiani, for example, expressed optimism about obtaining Su-35s on March 6.[22] Iranian rhetoric regarding the acquisition of Su-35 jets has shifted in recent months, however. Ashtiani later stated on May 28 that reports of Iran receiving Su-35s from Russia were "mostly speculation." Artesh Air Force Commander Brigadier General Hamid Vahedi stressed Iran needs the aircraft on June 2, but also added that "we don't know when it will enter our squadron."[23] This indicates that Iran is skeptical about receiving the Su-35 in return for supporting Russia's war in Ukraine.

Iran Update, July 10, 2023

Iran Update, July 10, 2023

Ashka Jhaveri, Andie Parry, Brian Carter, Annika Ganzeveld, Kitaneh Fitzpatrick, and Amin Soltani

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Key Takeaways

1. Iranian-backed militias and Syrian regime forces deployed to Deir ez Zor in response to rumors of an imminent International Coalition attack to liberate cities there which began in late June.
2. Lebanese Hezbollah and Syrian-regime media outlets claimed the United Arab Emirates (UAE) will pressure Turkey to withdraw its forces from Syria in exchange for direct investment. Iran and Syria may aim to use the media outlets to shape negotiations ahead of talks between Turkey and the Gulf States about Syrian-Turkish normalization.
3. Four Jaish al Adl militants attacked a police station in Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchistan Province on July 8 in retaliation for the September 2022 “Blood Friday” massacre, indicating that Jaish al Adl is trying to portray itself as the bastion of Iranian Baloch citizens. The Iranian regime limited its response to condemning the attack, likely to maintain stability in this restive border region.
4. IRGC-affiliated media is touting the successes of Iran-sponsored armed resistance in the West Bank against the recent Israeli raids into the area.
5. President Ebrahim Raisi will visit Kenya, Uganda, and Zimbabwe on July 11 to expand Iran’s economic influence in Africa, marking the first Iranian presidential visit to Africa in 11 years. Greater economic cooperation with African countries will not enable the Iranian regime to fix the structural flaws in Iran’s economy, however.

Iran Update | July 10, 2023



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Iranian-backed militias and Syrian regime forces deployed to Deir ez Zor in response to rumors of an imminent International Coalition attack to liberate cities there which began in late June.[1] Senior Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force (IRGC QF) and Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) officials met on July 7 to discuss Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and US forces deployments north of Deir ez Zor city.[2] The IRGC QF Eastern Region commander ordered Iranian-backed militants on July 8 to transport short and medium-range rockets to an Iranian headquarters in Hatla and Marat, approximately 10 kilometers from SDF-controlled territory.[3] Syrian regime forces also reinforced military positions in Mayadin[4] The Russian-backed Syrian Arab Army 5th Corps deployed with ten tanks to Hatla.[5] SDF militants reinforced several military checkpoints in its territory with personnel and heavy machinery along the lines of contact with regime forces between July 8-10.[6]

SDF forces may be reinforcing their positions near Khasham in response to ISIS activity in the area, which would cause the influx of SDF-backed forces. Demonstrators chanting pro-ISIS slogans and carrying ISIS flags moved along the M7 road, a major road connecting Deir ez Zor city to al Suwar, on July 4.[7] The SDF responded with raids against alleged ISIS supporters and the deployment of "hundreds" of personnel.[8] A local journalist also reported the SDF tasked the Internal Security Forces (InSF) with relieving SDF-backed Deir ez Zor Military Council forces in the area.[9]

CTP is considering the hypothesis that Iran will use the militant and Syrian regime forces that have deployed to eastern Syria to pursue an offensive strategy against US forces in Syria. This is plausible because Iran instructed the IRGC QF to achieve total hegemony in Deir ez Zor Province, Syria in May 2023, as CTP previously reported.[10] Iran has taken steps to advance this goal. Iran has trained militias in Syria to use a range of improvised and advanced weapons to attack US forces and recruited sleeper cells for informant activity in SDF-controlled territory in eastern Syria to train and strengthen its offensive capabilities since May.[11] Iran also established several military facilities including a joint headquarters with Lebanese Hezbollah to orchestrate and sustain offensive operations.[12] Iranian-backed militias framed 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 during two military parades in eastern Syria on June 24 and July 4.[13] The timeline below displays these developments in Deir ez Zor Province. This hypothesis is unlikely because Iranian-backed militants and officers fled Deir ez Zor Province for other provinces out of fear of International Coalition attacks[14] Indicators that would support the hypothesis include: 1) Iranian commanders ordering an attack on SDF-controlled territory; 2) Iranian-backed militants from other Syrian provinces deploy to Deir ez Zor Province; 3) Iran deploys militants from Afghanistan or Iraq to Deir ez Zor Province; 4) Iran messages support for the Syrian regime's territorial claims in eastern Syria.

Events in Deir ez Zor Province, Syria Informing Iranian Decisionmaking

ISW and CTP are laying out significant Iranian, Syrian, and US activity in Deir ez Zor Province to highlight Iranian objectives.



Sources: Eye of Euphrates, Middle East Eye, Washington Post, Deir ez Zor 24, Sada al Sharqieh.
[15]

Lebanese Hezbollah and Syrian-regime media outlets claimed the United Arab Emirates (UAE) will pressure Turkey to withdraw its forces from Syria in exchange for direct investment.[16] International media reported on July 7 that Turkish President Erdogan will visit the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar on July 17 — 19 to secure 10 billion USD of direct investment for the Turkish economy[17] The Axis of Resistance media outlets linked Erdogan’s travel to the UAE with Syrian-Turkish normalization, citing the UAE’s financial influence over Turkey and the UAE’s involvement in other Syrian normalization efforts.[18]

Iran and Syria may aim to use the media outlets to shape negotiations ahead of talks between Turkey and the Gulf States about Syrian-Turkish normalization. Iran stands to gain similar economic and military benefits from a UAE-brokered normalization and an Iran-Russia-brokered agreement. Arab states investing in Syria would create opportunities for the Syrian regime to fund Iranian reconstruction projects. This would provide Iran with another avenue to circumvent sanctions and a source of revenue to improve its economy. Such circumstances would also empower Iran to send more funds to its proxy and partner militias throughout Syria, further reinforcing its military presence. A Turkish withdrawal from all or part of Syria would enable Iranian military and economic expansion into previously inaccessible regions in northwestern Syria.

Iranian Domestic and Political Affairs

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Four Jaish al Adl militants attacked a police station in Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchistan Province on July 8 in retaliation for the September 2022 “Blood Friday” massacre, indicating that Jaish al Adl is trying to portray itself as the bastion of Iranian Baloch citizens.[19] The militants, who wore suicide vests and were equipped with grenades, stormed Police Station 16 in Zahedan, killing two Law Enforcement Command (LEC) officers.[20] All four assailants died during the attack.[21] Jaish al Adl is an anti-regime militant group that operates around the Iran-Pakistan border region and regularly conducts attacks against Iranian regime security forces.[22] Jaish al Adl issued threats against the regime in October 2022 following security forces’ violent suppression of protesters in Zahedan on September 30, 2022, an event that became known as “Bloody Friday.”[23] Jaish al Adl emphasized after the attack on July 8 that civil disobedience is insufficient to secure Baloch rights and vowed to conduct more “targeted and harmful” attacks in the future.

The Iranian regime limited its response to condemning the attack, likely to maintain stability in this restive border region. Foreign Affairs Ministry spokesperson Nasser Kanani “strongly condemned” the attack on July 9.[24] IRGC-affiliated media blamed the attack on prominent Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid.[25] Sistan and Baluchistan Province is a historically restive region that is home to a large Sunni Baloch population.[26] Sistan and Baluchistan Province residents hold numerous grievances against the regime, including discrimination against Sunni Baloch citizens and severe water shortages.[27] Residents in this province have protested the regime’s treatment of Sunni Baloch citizens in Zahedan every Friday for forty weeks.[28] The regime previously conducted negotiations with Sunni Baloch clerics following the “Bloody Friday” incident.[29]

The July 8 attack may strain Iran’s relationship with Pakistan, which Iran accuses of harboring Jaish al Adl militants.[30] The Iranian regime has frequently called on the Pakistani government to crack down on Jaish al Adl.[31] Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi stated on July 9 that Iran “expects

neighboring countries to take care of and control their borders.”[32] Iran may place increased pressure on Pakistan to dismantle Jaish al Adl cells in the coming weeks.

IRGC-affiliated media is touting the successes of Iran-sponsored armed resistance in the West Bank against the recent Israeli raids into the area.

IRGC-affiliated *Tasnim News Agency* argued on July 8 that Israel’s recent operations in the West Bank demonstrate that Israel is unable to deal with the resistance operations in the area.[33] *Tasnim* further claimed on July 10 that these raids demonstrated the success of Iran’s strategy to arm resistance groups in the area.

[34] Israeli forces raided the West Bank town of Nablus and conducted air and ground operations in another West Bank town, Jenin, between July 3 and 7.[35] Palestinian militants thanked Iran and the broader Axis of Resistance for their help during the recent raids.[36] CTP previously assessed that Palestinian militants will likely receive Iranian assistance to rebuild the military capabilities the IDF degraded.[37]

President Ebrahim Raisi will visit Kenya, Uganda, and Zimbabwe on July 11 to expand Iran’s economic influence in Africa, marking the first Iranian presidential visit to Africa in 11 years.[38] Raisi’s three-day trip will include the participation of Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian and unspecified Iranian businesspeople, underscoring the economic focus of the trip. Iranian media separately reported that Raisi will discuss trade—including Iranian oil derivate and fuel sales—with African officials. Iranian media framed Raisi’s visit as an extension of his Latin America tour to Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela in June 2023, which also focused on expanding economic cooperation with these states.

Greater economic cooperation with African countries will not enable the Iranian regime to fix the structural flaws in Iran’s economy, however. Greater bilateral trade with foreign countries would enable Iran to increase its capital inflows but will not solve the problems that underlie Iran’s economic instability. Fundamental economic reforms—such as reducing the dominance of para-statal organizations in Iran’s economy and combatting corruption and nepotism—would be necessary to meaningfully improve Iran’s economy.[39]

Iranian officials will likely discuss other avenues of cooperation, including environmental diplomacy, with their African counterparts. Iranian media reported that Raisi will discuss Iran participating in “extraterritorial cultivation” on African soil during his trip, which would mitigate the ramifications of Iranian water shortages.[40] Iran has previously supplied arms to Kenya and other African states and may leverage Raisi’s trip to strengthen security ties with Kenya, Uganda, and Zimbabwe and export arms.[41] Iranian officials have expressed interest in using arms sales to generate revenue for the economy in recent weeks. Armed Forces General Staff Chief Major General Mohammad Bagheri stated on May 31 that Iran will export its military capabilities to “friendly” countries.[42] Bagheri also called on Foreign Affairs Ministry officials to relay Iran’s willingness to export its defense capabilities to foreign dignitaries.

Iran Update, July 11, 2023

Iran Update, July 11, 2023

Ashka Jhaveri, Johanna Moore, 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](#).

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.

Key Takeaways

1. Iranian-backed militias and Syrian regime forces are continuing to reinforce their positions in Deir ez Zor Province in response to rumors of an imminent International Coalition attack to liberate cities.
2. The Shia Coordination Framework – a loosely aligned coalition of pro-Iranian political parties – blamed US sanctions on Iranian accounts in Iraq for failures in energy supply to Iraq from Iran, likely to place additional political pressure on the Iraqi government to remove the US from Iraq.
3. Social media accounts affiliated with the Popular Mobilization Force (PMF) circulated a call on July 11 for supporters to storm the US Embassy in Baghdad.
4. Iran is attempting to reestablish diplomatic relations with Egypt to portray itself as a member of the global community. Normalizing ties with Egypt would likely improve Iran's economy.
5. Iranian security personnel violently suppressed injured Iraq-Iran war veterans protesting livelihood conditions in front of the Martyr Affairs Foundation Headquarters in Tehran on July 8.

Iran Update | July 11, 2023



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Iranian Activities in the Levant

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

Iranian-backed militias and Syrian regime forces are continuing to reinforce their positions in Deir ez Zor Province in response to rumors of an imminent International Coalition attack to liberate cities. A rumor spread in eastern Syria in late June that the US-led International Coalition is going launch an attack into regime-controlled territory.[1] CTP cannot verify the origin of the rumor. The IRGC intensified local recruitment in eastern Syria and reinforced headquarters and weapons storage facilities with Iranian-backed militants in Deir ez Zor Province on July 11.[2] Iranian-backed militants also deployed from Iraq to Albu Kamal, Mayadin, and Deir ez Zor cities. [3] Unspecified Iranian leaders traveled from Damascus to Deir ez Zor City on July 11.[4] 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.[5] Iran and Iranian-backed forces took these steps while the Russian-backed SAA 5th Corps deployed forces and armored vehicles to several towns in the vicinity of Deir ez Zor City on July 10.[6] An unspecified delegation of high-ranking Russian officers traveled to a headquarters in the city for undisclosed reasons.[7]

The rumors are inconsistent with a statement the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) issued on July 11 that asserts the media has circulated misinformation about the movements of its forces in Deir ez Zor Province.[8] The statement noted that over the past few days the SDF has carried out non-emergency operations to eliminate ISIS cells, which suggests that the SDF force buildup in its territory is unrelated to an International Coalition attack into regime-controlled territory.

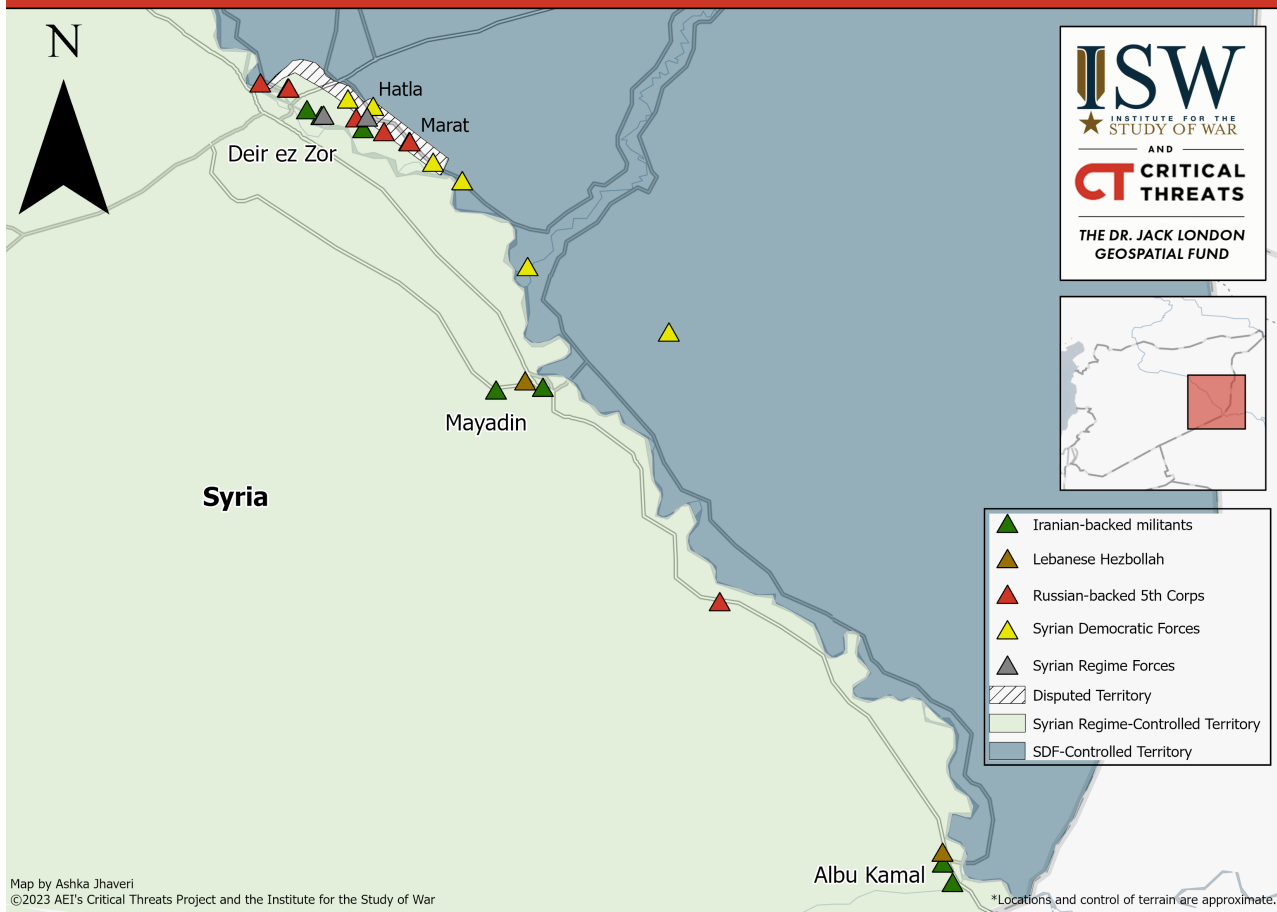
CTP is considering the hypothesis that Iran is deploying forces to Deir ez Zor Province to bolster its defensive positions in the event of kinetic activity with US forces or the SDF. This hypothesis is plausible because Iranian officials have warned of attacks against US forces in Syria that then occurred.[9] CTP has not observed Iranian officials warn of attacks in Deir ez Zor Province following the rumor. Iranian-backed militias attacked US forces following the death of an Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force (IRGC QF) officer during an Israeli airstrike in Syria, suggesting an offensive strategy against US forces following a rumor would be anomalous.[10] This hypothesis is unlikely because Iran has deployed many forces to Deir ez Zor Province and held meetings to discuss SDF and US reinforcements following rumors of an International Coalition operation.[11] Iran issuing orders to militias in Deir ez Zor province not to attack US forces or the SDF, fortifying key military facilities, and withdrawing forces from contact lines upon SDF withdrawals would support this hypothesis. Iranian deployments to bolster its defensive positions in proximity of SDF forces and territory risks miscalculations that could lead to armed conflict between Iranian-backed militias and the SDF. Militias set up rocket launchers in eight sites in Mayadin City, noting that militias have frequently used rockets to attack US bases in SDF-controlled territory. Iran giving priority to developing its defense positioning in Deir ez Zor may require Iran to slow or delay progress toward other Iranian objectives in eastern Syria. This includes facilitating the transfer of weapons and building military infrastructure for its proxies in the Levant via the Al Qaim Iraq-Syria border crossing.

CTP is considering an alternative hypothesis that Iranian deployment of forces to Deir ez Zor Province may support an offensive strategy against US forces in Syria. This hypothesis is plausible because Iranian leaders have prepared to resume their campaign to expel US forces from the Middle East. The *Washington Post* reported on June 1, citing classified documents leaked on the Discord messaging platform, on an Iranian effort to expel US forces from Syria.[12] This hypothesis is unlikely because Iran has restrained its proxies from conducting attacks against US forces. Iraqi proxies stopped threatening to attack US forces following IRGC QF Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani visit to Baghdad on June 8, suggesting Ghaani directed the proxies to deescalate.[13] Indicators that would support the hypothesis include:

- 1) Iranian commanders ordering an attack on SDF-controlled territory;
- 2) Iranian-backed militants from other Syrian provinces deploy to Deir ez Zor Province;
- 3) Iran deploys militants from Afghanistan or Iraq to Deir ez Zor Province;
- 4) Iran messages support for the Syrian regime's territorial claims in eastern Syria;
- 5) Iranian-backed forces conduct small-scale attacks into SDF-controlled territory to assess US reactions.

The implications of an Iranian offensive strategy against US forces are the risk of conflict regionalizing. Iranian-backed militants in Iraq attacked US forces in Syria on March 23, suggesting Iran would be able to target US forces from Iraq. Initiating an attack campaign against US forces in Syria would require Iran to slow or stop its other lines of effort in Syria. Such a campaign also would end nuclear negotiations with the United States, which would prevent Iran from securing sanctions relief as part of a new nuclear deal.[14]

Deployments in Deir ez Zor Province, Syria | July 8-11



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.

The Shia Coordination Framework – a loosely aligned coalition of pro-Iranian political parties – blamed US sanctions on Iranian accounts in Iraq for failures in energy supply to Iraq from Iran, likely to place additional political pressure on the Iraqi government to remove the US from Iraq.[15] Iraq's Minister of Electricity Ziyad Ali Fadhil al-Ruzeej announced on July 4 that all energy imports to southern Iraq had stopped and that imports to central Iraq had decreased by 62.5 percent, from 45 million cubic meters to 20 million cubic meters.[16] The Shia Coordination Framework released a statement on July 9 calling on the United States to unfreeze Iranian funds so the Iraqi government can pay energy-related debts to Iran.[17] Iranian media cited Kataib Hezbollah (KH)-affiliated media *Al Maalumah* article published on July 11 that blamed the US sanctions on Iranian energy cuts into Iran and called for international interference to remove US influence in Iraq.[18] Iranian Ambassador to Iraq Mohammed Kazem al-e Sadegh reiterated the Framework's claim and called on the Iraqi government to stop the US from exploiting Iraqis as political pawns to pressure Iran.[19]

These claims are inconsistent with official US and Iraqi statements about sanctions waivers and debts. US Department of State spokesperson Mathew Miller confirmed that the United States released \$2.7 billion in frozen Iranian funds for Iraqi to pay off energy debts to Iran during a press conference on June 13.[20] Iranian Deputy Minister of Oil's claimed on June 25 that the Iraqi government had paid off all of its gas and oil debts to Iran, contradicting Iraqi and Iranian officials. [21]

Social media accounts affiliated with the Popular Mobilization Force (PMF) circulated a call on July 11 for supporters to storm the US Embassy in Baghdad.[22] Official Iraqi proxy media outlets did not circulate calls to storm the US Embassy. The widespread circulation among pro-PMF social media users highlights the risk that individuals may target US positions independently from proxy or Iranian orders. CTP has not observed new indications that PMF-affiliated individuals intend to target US positions independent of proxy or Iranian direction. CTP previously assessed that Iran may have directed its Iraqi proxies to deescalate rhetoric against US forces in Iraq following an unannounced visit from IRGC Quds Force Commander Esmail Ghaani on June 8.[23]

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 attempting to reestablish diplomatic relations with Egypt to portray itself as a member of the global community.[24] Iranian media, citing London-based *Al Araby Al Jadeed*, reported on July 11 that Egypt and Iran have conducted negotiations to restore ties in recent days.[25] Former Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini severed diplomatic ties with Egypt following the 1979 Revolution, and Iran's relationship with Egypt has remained strained ever since.[26] Iran's pursuit of normalization with Egypt is part of its broader effort to remove itself from global isolation. Iran and Saudi Arabia reestablished bilateral relations on March 10.[27] President Ebrahim Raisi has additionally traveled to Syria, Indonesia, and Latin America in the past two months.[28] Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei expressed support for restoring relations with Egypt during a meeting with Omani Sultan Haytham bin Tareq al Said on May 29.[29]

Normalizing ties with Egypt would likely improve Iran's economy. Egypt is the most populous Arab country and thus presents Iran with a large market to export consumer goods.[30] Iran's Air Travel and Tourism Services Syndicate announced on July 2 that flights between Cairo and Tehran will resume within the next 45 days.[31] Direct flights would facilitate tourism and trade between Iran and Egypt. State-controlled IRNA also reported on July 2 that the Director General of Egypt's Tourism Ministry would soon travel to Tehran to discuss developing tourism between Iran and Egypt.[32]

Iranian security personnel violently suppressed injured Iraq-Iran war veterans protesting livelihood conditions in front of the Martyr Affairs Foundation Headquarters in Tehran on July 8.[33] Social media users circulated footage of tear-gassed pepper-sprayed veterans and claimed that security personnel had also arrested and beaten an unspecified number of protesters. Iran-Iraq war veterans have previously protested poor economic conditions, but the regime did not meet these protests with force.[34]

Iran Update, July 12, 2023

Iran Update, July 12, 2023

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

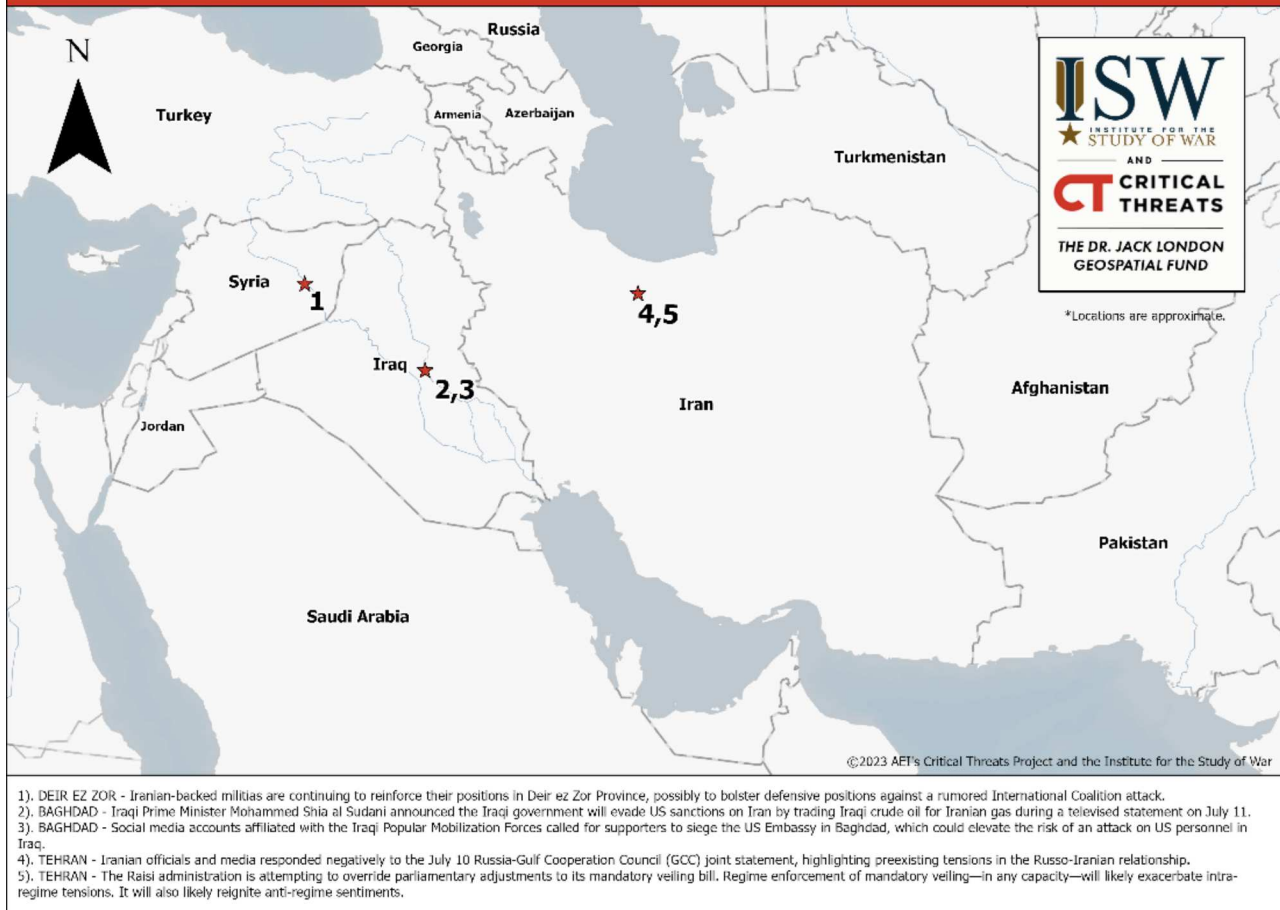
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Key Takeaways

- 1). Iranian-backed militias are continuing to reinforce their positions in Deir ez Zor Province, possibly to bolster defensive positions against a rumored International Coalition attack.
- 2). Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al Sudani announced the Iraqi government will evade US sanctions on Iran by trading Iraqi crude oil for Iranian gas during a televised statement on July 11.
- 3). Social media accounts affiliated with the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces called for supporters to siege the US Embassy in Baghdad, which could elevate the risk of an attack on US personnel in Iraq.
- 4.) Iranian officials and media responded negatively to the July 10 Russia-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) joint statement, highlighting preexisting tensions in the Russo-Iranian relationship.
- 5). The Raisi administration is attempting to override parliamentary adjustments to its mandatory veiling bill. Regime enforcement of mandatory veiling—in any capacity—will likely exacerbate intra-regime tensions. It will also likely reignite anti-regime sentiments.

Iran Update | July 12, 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 especially in Syria. This section examines some of the many campaigns that Iran is pursuing to achieve this strategic objective. CTP will update and refine our assessments of these campaigns over time and in future updates.

Iranian-backed militias are continuing to reinforce their positions in Deir ez Zor Province, possibly to bolster defensive positions against a rumored International Coalition attack. A rumor spread in eastern Syria in late June that the US-led International Coalition is going launch an attack into regime-controlled territory. Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) deployed to lines of contact with the Assad regime on July 7 which triggered Iran and the Syrian regime to surge fighters to the province. Iranian-backed militia leadership held a meeting on July 12 on the Syrian-Lebanon border near Damascus to discuss the developments in Deir ez Zor Province including their concerns about attacks they expect from the SDF and ways to counter them. IRGC commanders and others from several Axis of Resistance groups attended the meeting including Lebanese Hezbollah (LH), Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), Afghan Fatemiyoun, and Pakistani Zainabiyoun. The IRGC maintains several command centers near Damascus and frequently uses it as a meeting place to discuss operational developments in Syria. Iranian-backed militias including local elements have been reinforcing positions with personnel to repel a possible attack on Syrian regime-held territory since July 8.

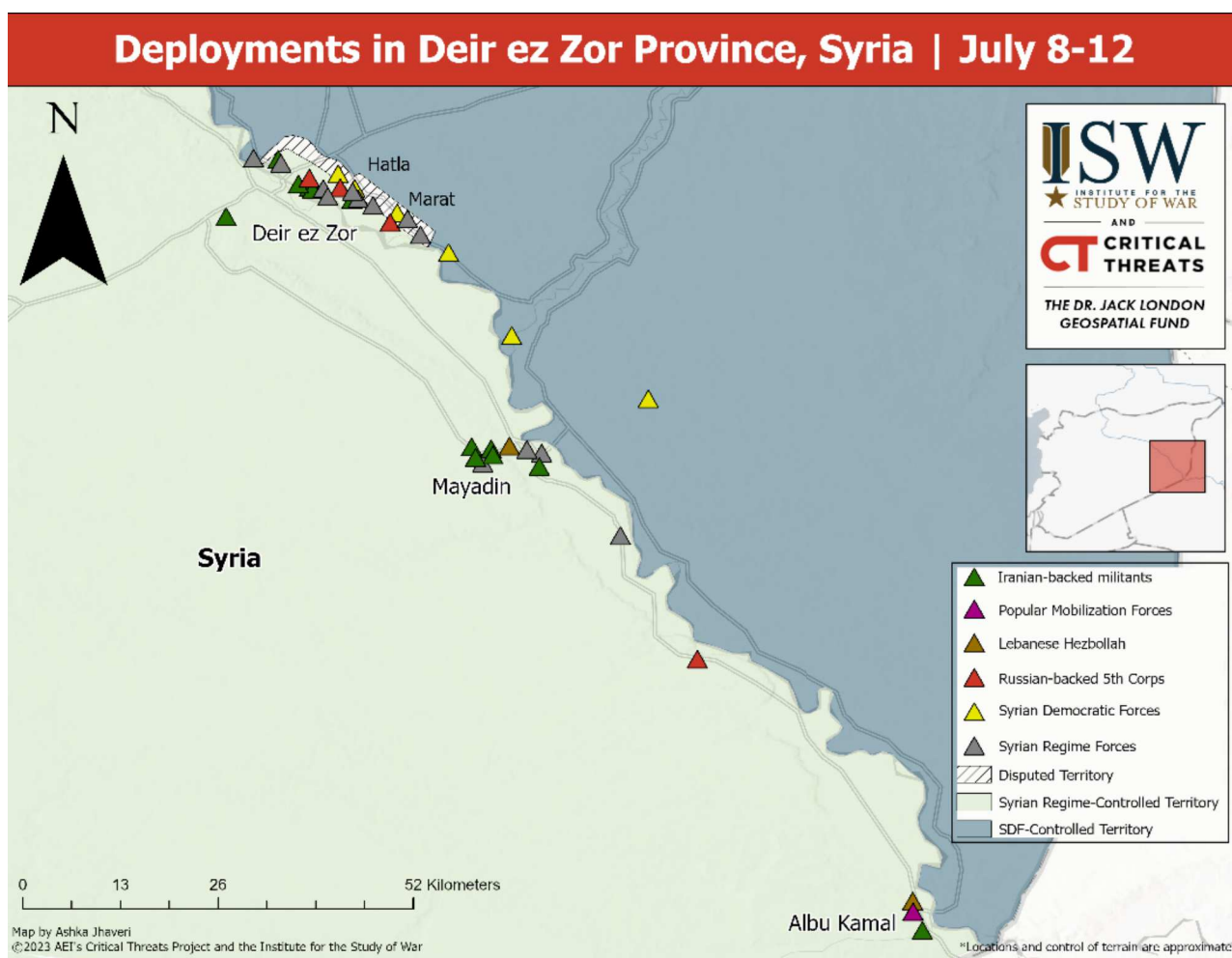
A series of high-level meetings between the SDF and officials in regime-controlled territory suggest the Assad regime and Iranian-backed forces remain concerned of an imminent International Coalition attack, despite reports of the SDF's actual intentions. The SDF issued a statement on July 11 that asserts the media has circulated misinformation about the movements of its forces in Deir ez Zor Province, as CTP has previously reported.[1] SDF leaders told Syrian regime military intelligence, the Syrian Deputy Defense Minister, and local officials that it does not intend to take

control over regime-controlled territory, which is a counter-indicator to this assessment.

[2] However, Syrian military leaders and Syrian and Iranian-backed forces continued to deploy to the province to rebel against an attack following the statement and meeting. Syrian Minister of Defense General Ali Mahmoud Abbas led a delegation of Syrian officials including the deputy of the Syrian Arab Army Fourth Division Major General Mohammad Ali Durgham to Deir ez Zor City on July 11 as regime forces remained on high alert for an attack.[3]

CTP is considering the alternative assessment that Iran may be using the security alert to pursue objectives to achieve regional hegemony, which threatens US force presence there. Iran instructed the IRGC QF to achieve total hegemony in Deir ez Zor Province, Syria in May 2023, which suggests that the buildup of forces in the province could serve objectives unrelated to defending against an International Coalition attack.[4] Iranian-backed militia deployments of personnel and weapons to Deir ez Zor Province since July 8 have built up Iran's military capabilities in the area. There are several factors that currently restrict Iran from achieving hegemony including ISIS threats, competition among militias, and the presence of US forces. Iranian leaders have prepared to resume their campaign to expel US forces from the Middle East, as CTP previously reported.[5] The meeting between Axis of Resistance commanders near Damascus on July 11 in addition to a surge of Iranian-backed militias in the province from the surrounding including Iraq supports both assessments. Iran relies on a robust foreign fighting force for military activities in Syria including attacking US forces.

CTP will follow up on this assessment in tomorrow's update with assessments about how Iran could exploit the changes in Deir ez Zor Province to achieve its hegemonic objectives in Syria and the broader Middle East.



Iranian Activities in Iraq

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pursuing to achieve this strategic objective. CTP will update and refine our assessments of these campaigns over time and in future updates.

Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al Sudani announced the Iraqi government will evade US sanctions on Iran by trading Iraqi crude oil for Iranian gas during a televised statement on July 11.[6] Sudani reiterated the Shia Coordination's claim that the gas supply from Iran has been cut off because US sanctions on Iranian assets have prevented Iraq from paying Iraq's energy debts. Iranian Deputy Minister of Oil Majid Chegani claimed on June 25 that Iraq had paid off its gas debts to Iran after the US released \$2.7 billion in frozen Iranian funds as CTP previously reported.[7] Iraqi President Abdul Latif Rashid outlined Iraq's intent to form a closer relationship with Iran during an interview with the Iranian TV channel *Al Alam* on July 12 following Sudani's announcement.[8] Current US sanctions on Iran prevent any transactions involving Iranian petroleum or petroleum products.[9]

Social media accounts affiliated with the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces called for supporters to siege the US Embassy in Baghdad, which could elevate the risk of an attack on US personnel in Iraq. The PMF-affiliated social media users called for supporters to siege the embassy on Friday, July 14 at 5:00 pm local time.[10] One account provided a WhatsApp telephone number for users to contact for more information, demonstrating an increased level of coordination and preparation.[11] Iranian-backed Iraqi proxy Ashab al Kahf released an image of the US Embassy in Baghdad and included a caption referencing Kataib Hezbollah's direction to storm the embassy in late 2019 to early 2020.[12] This is the first instance of an official Iraqi proxy media channel circulating calls to storm the embassy. Ashab al Kahf has previously threatened to attack US forces without conducting 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.

Iranian officials and media responded negatively to the July 10 Russia-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) joint statement, highlighting preexisting tensions in the Russo-Iranian relationship. The Russia-GCC joint statement expressed support for the Emirati claim to three Iranian-controlled Islands in the Persian Gulf.[13] Iran seized the Greater and Lesser Tunbs and Abu Musa islands in 1971 shortly after the British withdrawal from the Gulf. Iran's Foreign Affairs Ministry summoned Russian Ambassador Alexey Dedov on July 12 to object to the statement.[14] Iran similarly summoned Chinese Ambassador Li Tieh-tseng in December 2022 over Chinese support for a negotiated settlement of the disputed islands.[15] Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian emphasized the importance of preserving Iran's territorial integrity on July 12 and Foreign Affairs Ministry spokesperson Nasser Kanani stated on July 11 that the Russia-GCC statement upset Iran's improving relations with its neighbors while reaffirming Iran's ownership over the islands.[16] Other officials similarly criticized Russia for acting against Iran's national interests and attempting to create tensions between Iran and the Gulf Arab states.[17] Reformist-affiliated media also published critical articles narrating what they perceived to be a history of repeated "anti-Iranian" Russian actions in the recent and distant past.[18]

Chinese and Russian support for the Emirati claim to the three islands is part of their strategy to simultaneously balance their relationships with Iran and the Gulf Arab states.[19] The Sino-Russian-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has admitted four of the six GCC member states into the organization as dialogue partners. Both China and Russia have separately initiated strategic dialogue forums with the entire GCC.[20] The July 10 Russia-GCC joint statement was published at the conclusion of the most recent Russia-GCC strategic dialogue summit in Moscow, which started in 2016.[21] Chinese President Xi Jinping traveled to Riyadh in December 2022 to participate in the China-GCC summit.[22] Both Russia and China have simultaneously advanced their relationship with Iran, the most recent example of which was admitting Iran into the SCO as a full member on July 4.[23]

The Raisi administration is attempting to override parliamentary adjustments to its mandatory veiling bill. The Raisi administration and the Iranian judiciary finalized a joint draft of its mandatory veiling and modesty bill on May 21, which would expand the scope of punishment for women it perceives to be immodestly dressed.[24] The regime previously employed Article 638 of its penal code to castigate unveiled women, which states that individuals who “explicitly violate religious taboo in public, besides being punished for the act, should also be imprisoned from ten days to two months or flogged.”[25] The article neither references veiling nor provides a definition of what improper veiling is, making the Raisi administration’s proposed hijab bill a codification and expansion of preexisting laws. Parliament was supposed to approved the bill on June 20 but has failed to pass it.[26] A Raisi administration official claimed on July 12 that parliamentarians have changed the bill beyond recognition and stripped it of its intent.[27] Iranian media previously reported that hardliners have criticized Raisi’s bill for being too lenient on unveiled women, and it is possible that hardliners changed the bill to make it more draconian than what the administration initially proposed.[28]

Raisi administration officials have suggested that they will begin operating within preexisting legal parameters to enforce mandatory veiling and discourage relevant regime entities from waiting for the bill’s approval.[29] The regime has previously leveraged other articles to arbitrarily enforce veiling. These articles include Article 134, which can be used to either increase or limit imposed sentences, and Article 639, wherein individuals can be imprisoned for one to ten years. [30] Iranian women have separately reported an uptick in modesty-related arrests and detainments in recent days, suggesting that this may encompass the Raisi administration’s new approach.[31]

The regime is very unlikely to abolish the veiling law, as Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has repeatedly identified mandatory veiling as a red line.[32] 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. The regime views enforced veiling as one of the foundations of its Islamic identity and authority. 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.[33]

Regime enforcement of mandatory veiling—in any capacity—will likely reignite anti-regime sentiments among large segments of the Iranian populous. The violent enforcement of mandatory veiling that resulted in the death of Mahsa Amini resulted in months of anti-regime protests. A 2019 parliamentary report stated that 70 percent of Iranian women favored relaxing dress codes.[34]

Regime enforcement of mandatory veiling will also likely deepen the intra-regime fissures created by the Mahsa Amini movement. Hardliners have criticized the Raisi administration’s proposed hijab bill for being too lenient and some Iranians have demonstrated against relaxing mandatory veiling in recent days.[35] Judiciary First Deputy Hojjat ol Eslam Mohammad Mossadegh expressed surprise that unspecified clerics were weary of the government’s role in enforcing modesty standards on July 12, suggesting that veiling enforcement has also created fissures between hardliners and the clerical establishment.[36]

Senior Iranian military officials expressed concern about the perceived Israeli threats emanating from Iran’s northwestern borders on July 11 and 12.[37] Armed Forces General Staff Chief Maj. Gen. Mohammed Bagheri warned that Iran would resume kinetic operations in Iraqi Kurdistan if it failed to disarm “separatist groups” in this region and stated that Israel had “no place” in the region on July 11. Bagheri also imposed the beginning of the Iranian month of Shahrivar (August 23) as a deadline for the Iraqi government to act. Bagheri is responsible for Iranian military policy and strategic guidance. Supreme Leader Military Affairs Advisor Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi similarly stated in a speech at the IRGC Northwest Regional Headquarters that the United States, European Union, and Israel are attempting to destabilize the Caucasus. Iran’s concern about perceived Israeli threats along its borders is not new; CTP

previously assessed on May 31 that Iran was likely attempting to coerce Iraq into complying with Iranian security concerns about Israeli activities in Iraqi Kurdistan.[38]

Iran Update, July 14, 2023

Iran Update, July 14, 2023

Annika Ganzeveld, Amin Soltani, Johanna Moore, Ashka Jhaveri, Brandon Kanell, Alexa Albanese, Radhika Bhargava, and Alexander Coffen

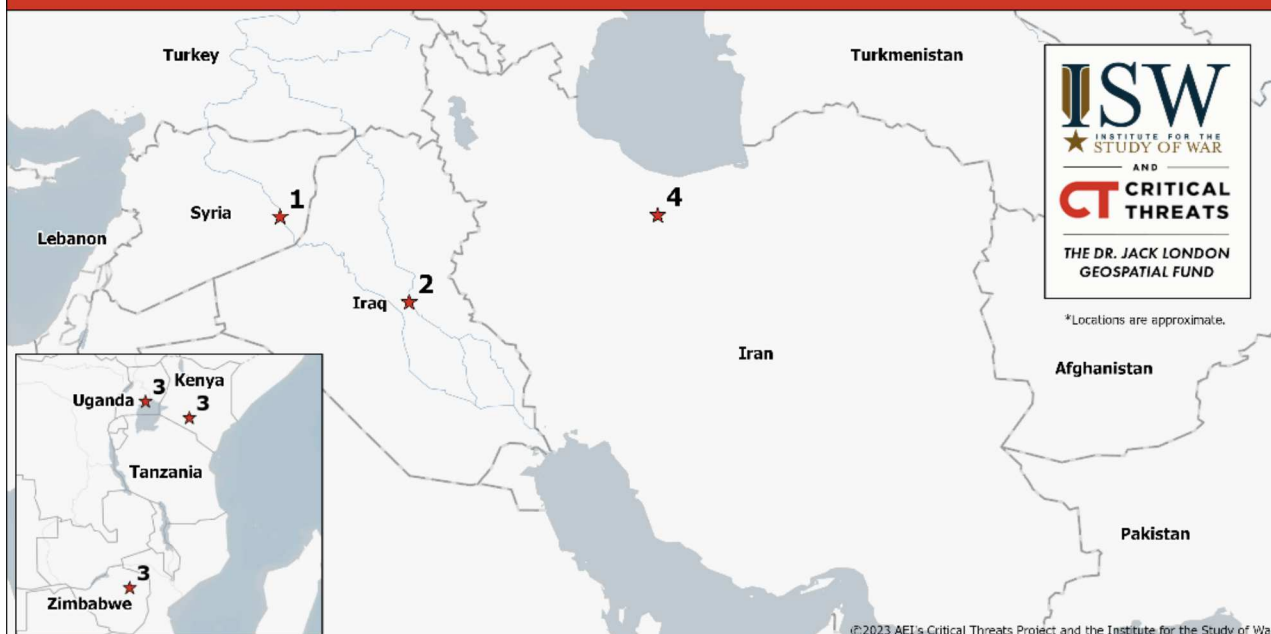
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Key Takeaways

1. Iranian-backed militias raised salaries for standard militia members in Mayadin and Albu Kamal Cities, Deir ez Zor Province by 13 percent on July 13, likely enabling Iran to maintain a competitive advantage in recruitment amid increasing troop deployments to the province.
2. Popular Mobilization Force (PMF)-affiliated social media accounts that circulated calls to storm the US Embassy on July 14 prompted two small demonstrations of Ashab al Kahf protesters in the Jadiriyah District and al Kahdra neighborhood of Baghdad.
3. President Ebrahim Raisi traveled to Kenya, Uganda, and Zimbabwe between July 12-14 as part of his administration's intensifying economic diplomacy efforts.
4. Senior security and foreign policy officials are articulating the regime's comprehensive perspective on threats emanating from the Caucasus.

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[1] Iran and Iranian-backed militias increased local militia salaries by over 100,000 Syrian pounds (SYP), bringing the maximum militant salary to around 1,000,000 SYP.[2] Local news source *Deir Ezzor 24* cited recent rumors of an attack by the International Coalition and SDF forces as the reason for the increase.[3] The Syrian National Defense Militia salaries for militants typically are around 300,00 SYP.[4]

The salaries for militants vary by role. The average Iranian-backed militant in Deir ez Zor received 600,000 SYP in February 2023.[5] The Iranian-backed Al-Bashir militia recruited volunteers to patrol the T2 station, Muayzila, and Al Salihya, Albu Kamal City for 750,000 SYP.[6] Iranian-backed militias pay militants in less risky positions, such as guards, around 250,000 SYP.[7] This indicates that higher-risk jobs usually entail danger pay. Iran's decision to raise salaries in such an uncharacteristic manner demonstrates its concern of International Coalition and SDF attacks.

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.

Popular Mobilization Force (PMF)-affiliated social media accounts that circulated calls to storm the US Embassy on July 14 prompted two small demonstrations of Ashab al Kahf protesters in the Jadiriyah District and al Kahdra neighborhood of Baghdad. PMF-affiliated social media accounts first circulated calls on July 11 to storm the US Embassy in protest of US sanctions that supporters claimed were responsible for energy cuts from Iran.[8] Key Iranian-backed Iraqi proxies did not support the calls to storm the US Embassy in Baghdad, as CTP previously reported.[9] Local social media footage showed approximately 100-200 protesters total carrying Ashab al Kahf flags and portraits of former Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani and former PMF Chairman Abu Mahdi al Muhandis. That Ashab al Kahf motivated only two small demonstrations suggests that the group has a small base of support. Ashab al Kahf protesters briefly came into contact with police in riot gear on the 14 of July suspension bridge connecting the Green Zone to Jadiriyah District but did not escalate into any violence.[10] CTP did not record any indications that other Iraqi proxies participated in the protests.

The head of Asaib Ahl al Haq's political wing, Hassan Salem, and the head of Kataib Hezbollah's political wing, Hossein Monis, spoke at the demonstrations and discussed continued political resistance against the United States.[11] Neither called for supporters to join the protests. Both of the militias' political wings are members of the Shia Coordination Framework and the majority coalition in the Iraqi Parliament. Salem and Monis' statements highlight KH and AAH's interest in protecting political stability for the Coordination Framework. Their stances are consistent with a statement from Badr Organization Secretary General Hadi al Ameri on July 13 in which he called for a unified political stance against the US Treasury to fight for Iraq's independence from the United States.[12] This indicates the Framework is not giving priority to expelling the United States from Iraq.

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.

President Ebrahim Raisi traveled to Kenya, Uganda, and Zimbabwe between July 12-14 as part of his administration's intensifying economic diplomacy efforts. Raisi's trip marks the first Iranian presidential visit to Africa in over a decade.[13] This trip follows Raisi's visits to Indonesia in late May and Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela in early June, which were similarly focused on economic cooperation.[14] No Iranian president had traveled to Indonesia since 2006, to Nicaragua since 2007, and to Cuba and Venezuela since 2016.[15] Raisi's visits to these countries within the span of two months demonstrate that his administration is doubling down on its "neighborhood policy," which is an economic policy centered on building relations with regional and extra-regional states to undermine Western sanctions.[16]

President Ebrahim Raisi's International Travel in 2023



Map: AEI's Critical Threats Project • Source: Author's Research: Alexa Albanese, Radhika Bhargava, and Alexander Coffen • Created with Datawrapper

Raisi's International Travel Since August 2021

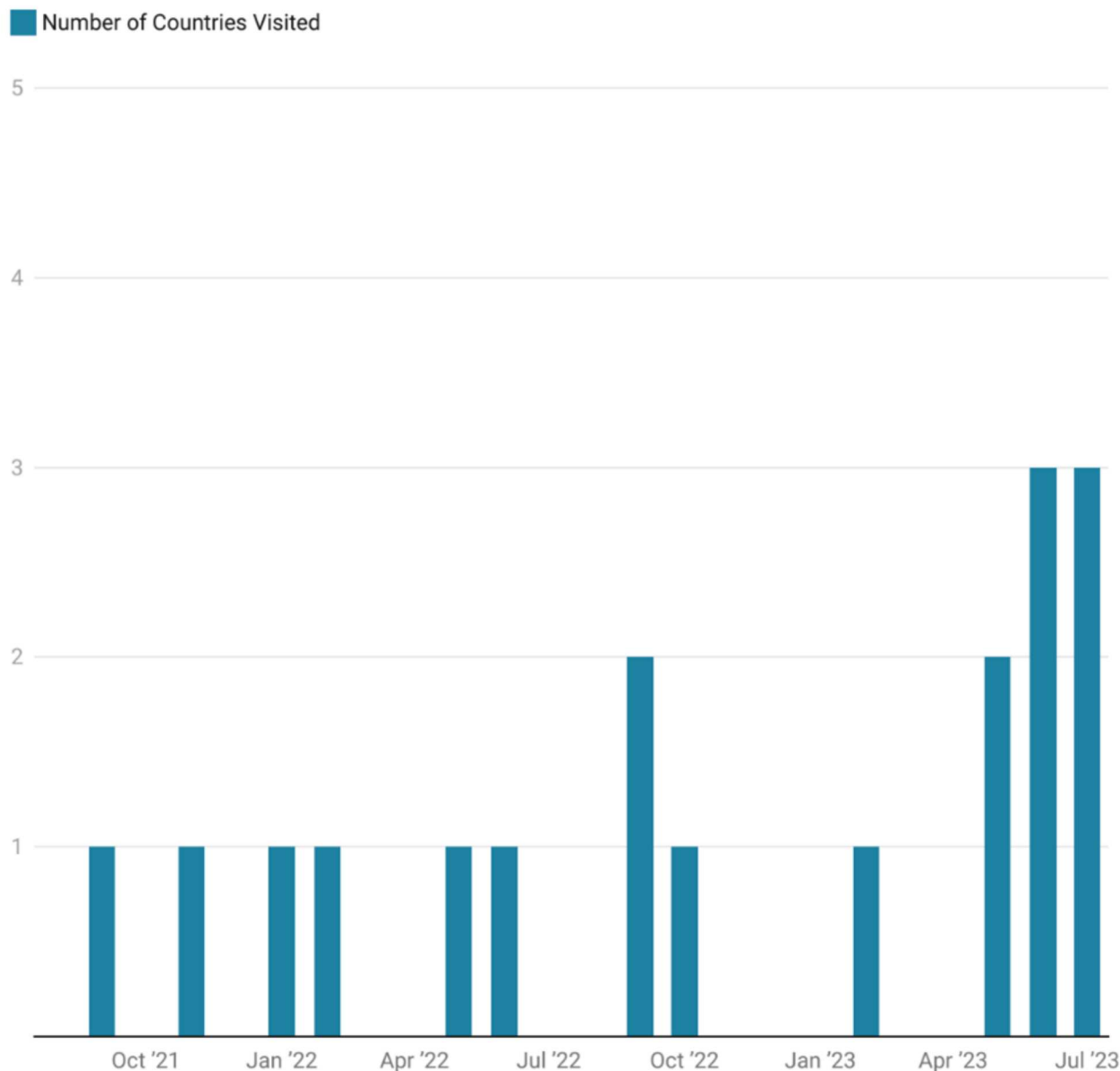


Chart: AEI's Critical Threats Project • Source: Author's Research: Alexa Albanese, Radhika Bhargava, and Alexander Coffen • Created with Datawrapper

The Raisi administration is pursuing extraterritorial cultivation in Africa, which will help Iran conserve its water resources. Conserving water could reduce protests caused by water shortages in Iran. Extraterritorial cultivation refers to Iran using arable land in other countries to grow crops and then exporting the crops to Iran.[17] President Ebrahim Raisi attended the launch of “Iran's extraterritorial cultivation in Uganda” on July 12.[18] 80 percent of Uganda’s land is arable, presenting an opportunity for Iran to export its agricultural production to this country. [19] Transferring agricultural production to Uganda would help Iran conserve water, especially since Iran currently uses about 90 percent of its water for agriculture.[20] Water shortages have previously precipitated large-scale protests in Iran. Hundreds of Esfahan Province residents previously protested water shortages in November 2021, for example.[21] Iran has gained extraterritorial cultivation land in other countries, such as Venezuela.[22]

Iran seeks to undermine and mitigate the impact of Western sanctions through greater economic cooperation with Kenya, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. Iranian officials and media have emphasized Africa’s mineral richness in recent days. State-controlled IRNA reported on July 10 that African countries can export gold and diamonds to Iran.[23] Iranian Ambassador to Uganda Majid Saffar separately stated on July 12 that Uganda’s mineral reserves and natural resources are

“definitely needed” by Iran.[24] The Iranian regime uses gold to evade Western sanctions by allowing exporters to repay export-related dues to the government using gold instead of hard currency.[25] Iran's Trade Promotion Organization additionally announced in May that Iran imported a “record amount” of gold between March and May “to get around US sanctions.”[26]

Iran also seeks to increase oil sales to African countries. President Ebrahim Raisi stated on July 14 that Iran agreed to import basic goods from unspecified African countries in return for petrochemical products and materials.[27] High-ranking Iranian and Zimbabwean officials signed 12 cooperation agreements, including an oil and energy agreement, on July 13.[28] It is unclear whether Iran is pursuing similar energy agreements with Kenya and Uganda. Kenya previously cancelled an agreement to import 4 million tons of Iranian crude oil per year after Western countries threatened it with sanctions in 2012.[29]

Greater bilateral trade with African countries will increase Iran's capital inflows but will not solve the problems that underlie Iran's economic instability. Fundamental economic reforms—such as reducing the dominance of para-statal organizations in Iran's economy, combatting corruption and nepotism, and diversifying exports—would be necessary to meaningfully improve Iran's economy.[30]

Senior security and foreign policy officials are articulating the regime's comprehensive perspective on threats emanating from the Caucasus. Supreme Leader Foreign Policy Advisor Ali Akbar Velayati warned Russia on July 13 about possible NATO interference and aggression in the Caucasus.[31] Velayati argued that the change in Turkey's policies vis-à-vis NATO, such as agreeing to approve Sweden's NATO ascension, and Turkey's links to Azerbaijan, raises the risk of conflict in the Caucasus region. He highlighted that such conflict would lead to long-term tensions in the region that Iran's adversaries—specifically the United States and Israel—will exploit to “undermine the security of the entire region.” Velayati is a senior adviser to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, which means his statements reflect the views of the supreme leader and the threats he perceives to Iranian interests. That Velayati's letter was written in English also suggests that it was intended for a foreign and not Iranian audience.

Velayati's comments are consistent with recent statements by other representatives from the Supreme Leader's office about the Caucasus, as well as the regime's overall perspective on threats in the region.[32] Regime officials have repeatedly expressed similar concerns about the United States and Israel exploiting conflict and the presence of anti-regime separatist groups in northern Iraq to undermine Iran's security interests.[33] Velayati stressed this warning to Russia by stating that “our Russian friends need to be careful” not to neglect the Caucasus as “ill-intending parties... would attack the interests of Russia and the Islamic Republic of Iran.” He argued that Russia has abandoned the Caucasus after its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and needs to be cognizant of the potential for conflict and competition in the region.

Velayati presented the threat of Turkish expansionism in the region as a mutual Russo-Iranian security interest. Velayati warned Russia that Turkey's pan-Turkic aspirations to connect areas where Turkic populations reside between Istanbul and Xinjiang could create an area in which NATO influence spreads and geographically separates Iran and Russia. He emphatically stated that this “this should be a red line of Iran and Russia.” Russia and Iran are home to significant Turkic populations. Both have been concerned since the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War that pan-Turkic rhetoric will prompt Turkic secessionist movements in Iran and Russia.[34]

Velayati also responded to the joint Russia-Gulf Cooperation Council statement on July 10 about Iran's claim to three disputed islands in the Persian Gulf with the warning that Iran's “Russian friends” not to be naïve. The joint statement expressed support for the Emirati claim to the three Iranian-controlled Islands in the Persian Gulf.[35] Iranian officials and media responded negatively to the statement between July 12 and 13, as CTP previously reported.[36] Chinese and Russian support for the Emirati claim to the three islands is part of their strategy to simultaneously balance their relationships with Iran and the Gulf Arab states.[37]

IRGC Commander Major General Hossein Salami stated that the Islamic Revolution is experiencing its "most sensitive time" during a meeting with national and provincial military commanders in Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province on July 13.[38] Salami added that Iran's enemies are targeting Iranian youth and that the Islamic Republic "must save our children from the enemy's fire." These statements underscore that the regime remains concerned over the potential for instability among the Iranian population, particularly youth. University students largely spearheaded the Mahsa Amini movement between September 2022 and January 2023.[39] These statements also follow Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's July 12 speech in which he stated that Iranian youth should be the "focus" of "innovative propaganda." [40]

Roads and Urban Development Ministry Infrastructure Affairs Representative Hossein Mir Sharifi announced on July 13 that Iran and Afghanistan are seeking to attract Chinese investment and participation in the construction of a Chinese-Iranian-Afghan railway corridor.[41] Iran and Afghanistan also inaugurated that Khaf, Khorasan Razavi Province, Iran-Herat City, Herat Province, Afghanistan railway on July 13.[42] Sharifi stated that the Khaf-Herat railway "completes" the 2,000-kilometer east-west rail corridor that connects China, Afghanistan, and Iran to Europe. Iran has frequently relied on foreign countries to finance its infrastructure projects. Russia agreed to partially finance Iranian construction of the Rasht-Astara railway on May 17, for example.[43]

Iran Update, July 17, 2023

Iran Update, July 17, 2023

**Ashka Jhaveri, Andie Parry, Johanna Moore, Kitaneh Fitzpatrick, and Annika Ganzeveld,
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](#).

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.

Iran Update | July 17, 2023



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1. DEIR EZ ZOR - A US senior defense official said Iran, Russia, and Syria are cooperating to pressure the US to withdraw forces from Syria. This is consistent with CTP's assessment that Iran's military buildup in eastern Syria may be to achieve hegemony.
 2. DAMASCUS - Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' al Sudani met with Syrian President Bashar al Assad in Damascus on July 16 to discuss economic, security, and normalization issues. The improvement of Iraqi-Syrian relations through joint economic integration projects very likely would enable Iran to exploit regional trade to improve its economy and bolster Iranian regional influence.
 3. TEHRAN - Senior Iranian and Pakistani military officials met in Tehran between July 15 and 17. The meetings likely regard the volatile security situation in southeastern Iran, where Jaish al Adl conducted an attack on July 8.
 4. TEHRAN - Israel-based *i24News* claimed on July 16 that Armenia has used Iranian Shahed drones in several recent clashes with Azerbaijan. Iran may expand its military support to Armenia in response to Russian "negligence" toward the Caucasus.
 5. TEHRAN - The Iranian Law Enforcement Command (LEC) resumed the country-wide deployment of its morality patrol officers to enforce mandatory veiling on July 16.

Key Takeaways

1. A US senior defense official said Iran, Russia, and Syria are cooperating to pressure the US to withdraw forces from Syria. This is consistent with CTP's assessment that Iran's military buildup in eastern Syria may be to achieve hegemony.
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Iranian Activities in the Levant

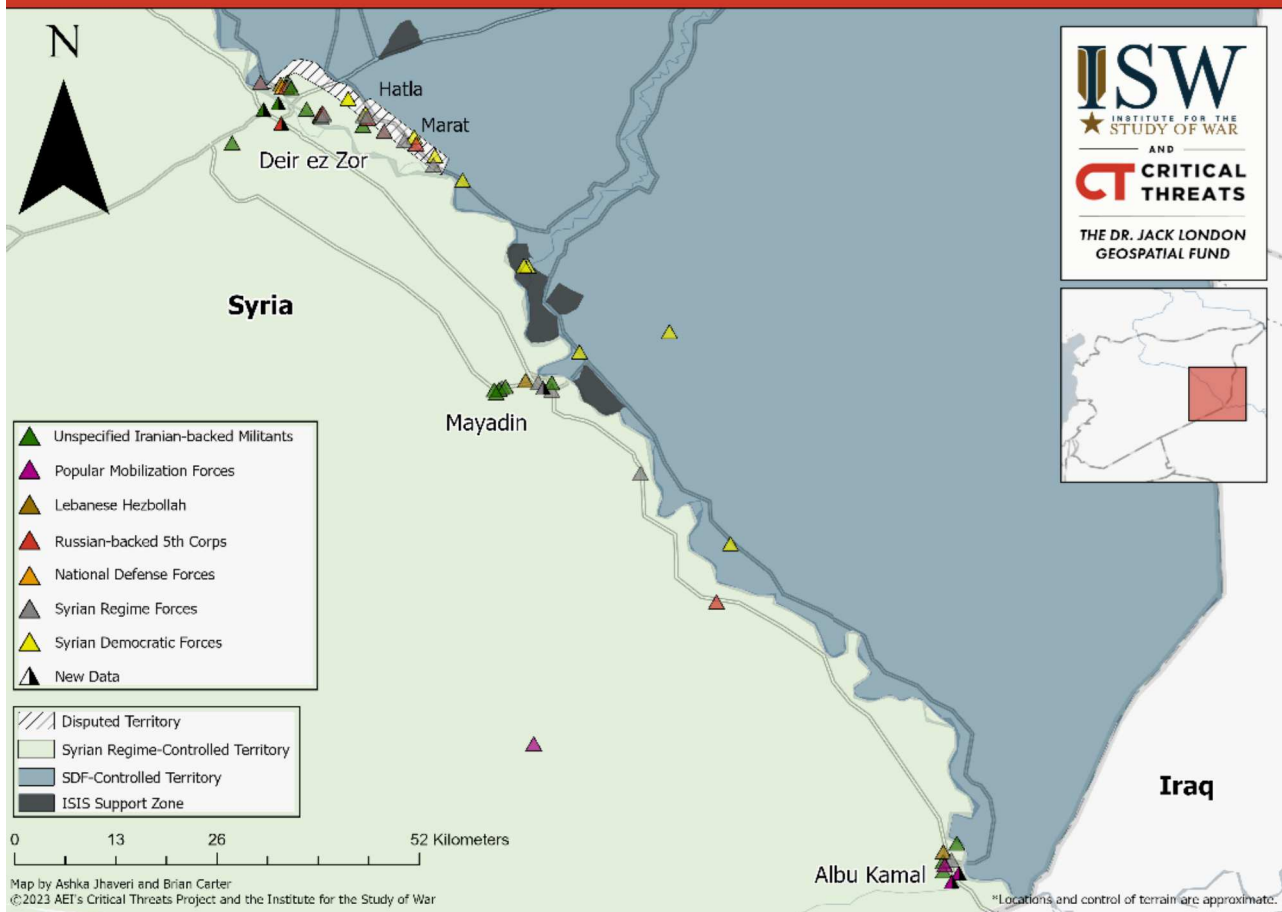
This section covers Iranian efforts to consolidate and expand Tehran's economic, military, and political influence throughout the Levant especially in Syria. This section examines some of the many campaigns that Iran is pursuing to achieve this strategic objective. CTP will update and refine our assessments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

A US senior defense official said Iran, Russia, and Syria are cooperating to pressure the US to withdraw forces from Syria. This is consistent with CTP's assessment that Iran's military buildup in eastern Syria may be to achieve hegemony. [1] The official, who spoke to Pentagon reporters on the condition of anonymity, said that the United States is increasingly concerned about growing ties between Iran, Russia, and Syria across the Middle East. The ties involve collaboration, planning, and intelligence sharing between IRGC Quds Force and Russian military personnel in Syria.[2] CTP has been monitoring Iran develop its forces in Syria to resume its campaign to expel US forces from the Middle East since early June.[3] A rumor spread in eastern Syria in late June that the US-led International Coalition is going launch an attack into regime-controlled territory. Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) deployed to lines of contact with the Assad regime on July 7 which triggered Iran and the Syrian regime to surge fighters to the province.

The official also noted that Russia's aggressive military flights, such as an unprofessional intercept of a US drone on July 5 and repeated violations of US airspace in Syria since March, are part of growing cooperation with Iran to pressure the United States to leave Syria.[4] CTP previously considered the hypothesis that Iran and Russia would share intelligence to support Iranian-backed attacks on US forces following a meeting on June 7 between Iranian and Russian military officials to discuss expelling the United States from Syria.[5] The *Washington Post* reported on June 1 on classified documents leaked on the Discord messaging platform which highlighted the construction of an Iranian-Russian "coordination center" in Syria to direct the new Iranian campaign in Syria. [6] The *Washington Post* described the center as an inflection in Iranian-Russian cooperation in Syria.

Iranian-backed militias continue to reinforce positions in Deir ez Zor Province amid rumored International Coalition attacks. Iranian-backed militias including the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces, Lebanese Hezbollah, and Fatemiyoun deployed between July 14 and 17 to positions along Iran's ground line of communication from Albu Kamal to Deir ez Zor cities.[7] A massive number of civilians in Albu Kamal city fled on July 16 according to local media, following rumored International Coalition attacks as Iranian-backed militias arrived to residential neighborhoods. [8] Syrian Minister of Defense Major General Ali Mahmoud Abbas met on July 13 with IRGC QF officials in Deir ez Zor City to discuss coordination between their two forces, which suggests an alignment of interests.[9]

Military Deployments in Deir ez Zor Province, Syria | July 7-17



The Axis of Resistance continues to frame 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. IRGC-affiliated *Tasnim News Agency* published a video in Arabic on July 16 entitled “The military preparation/formation of the US and its partners for attacking the resistance: America is playing with fire in Eastern Syria.”[10] The video claims the United States sent large military reinforcements to bases in eastern Syria and that local allies, likely referring to the SDF, are preparing for an offensive military operation into regime-controlled territory. Lebanese Hezbollah-affiliated media *Al Mayadeen* reported on July 15 that the United States deployed to Deir ez Zor Province and informed the SDF and Free Syrian Army to prepare for any attacks from regime-controlled territory.[11] Iranian-backed militants have held several military parades in Deir ez Zor Province since late June in response to a rumored International Coalition attack.[12] CTP previously assessed that the parades are part of an Iranian effort to incite and sustain local support.[13]

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.

Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' al Sudani met with Syrian President Bashar al Assad in Damascus on July 16.[14] This was the first visit of an Iraqi Prime Minister to Syria since 2010 and it signifies progress in Arab-Syrian normalization.[15] Iraqi government spokesperson Bassem al Awadis stated on July 16 that Sudani sought to involve Syria in economic integration projects and renew Iraq’s oil export pipeline through Syria.[16] Sudani and Bashar discussed economic, security, and normalization issues during their meetings but did not sign any agreements.

[17] Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi in contrast, signed over 10 economic memorandums of understanding with Assad during his visit to Syria from May 3 – 5.[18]

The improvement of Iraqi-Syrian relations through joint economic integration projects very likely would enable Iran to exploit regional trade to improve its economy and bolster Iranian regional influence. Iranian officials have repeatedly emphasized their intention to link Iranian transportation infrastructure to Iraq and Syria to access Mediterranean markets.[19] Iran's Minister of Roads and Urban Development met with Syrian stakeholders to discuss the revitalization of a rail link between Iran, Iraq and Syria in April.[20] Syria-Iraq-Iran economic integration would increase capital inflow to Iran, which would help reinvigorate Iran's deteriorating economy. A greater integrated regional economic order would also help Iran evade sanctions by using Iraq's unsanctioned markets. Iran has already established significant economic influence in both Syria and Iraq through its state and parastatal organizations such as the Khatam al Anbia Construction Headquarters, which is the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' engineering and development firm that oversees large-scale civil-military construction projects and helps the regime circumvent sanctions. An integrated economic order would ultimately enable the Iranian regime to further entrench itself in Syria and Iraq, however the regime's ability to reap the economic, political, and military benefits depends on long term implementation.

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 and Pakistani military officials met in Tehran between July 15 and 17.

[21] Armed Forces General Staff Chief Major General Mohammad Bagheri and IRGC Commander Major General Hossein Salami met with Pakistani Army Chief of Staff General Syed Asim Munir Ahmad Shah to discuss counterterrorism cooperation and expanding their bilateral relations more generally. Both sides agreed to share intelligence and take "effective action" against terrorist networks operating on their border. Bagheri last spoke with his Pakistani counterpart Lieutenant General Shahir Shamshad on January 9 to discuss establishing a joint military task force for addressing border security threats.[22] Bagheri and other security officials have repeatedly met with their Pakistani counterparts over the past several years as part of Iran's long-standing effort to secure Pakistani cooperation with addressing anti-regime militant activity in the border areas. [23] Iran, China, and Pakistan also held their first trilateral counterterrorism and regional security meeting on June 7.[24] The three countries decided to hold regular regional security and counterterrorism meetings.

The meetings likely regard the volatile security situation in southeastern Iran. Iran's Sistan and Baluchistan Province has experienced instability since the start of Mahsa Amini protests last September. Zahedan residents have participated in anti-regime protests for 41 consecutive weeks and have consistently used the weekly Friday protests to commemorate the "Bloody Friday," an incident wherein Iranian security forces killed at least 80 anti-regime protesters.[25] Four Jaish al Adl militants attacked a police station in Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchistan Province on July 8 in retaliation for the September 2022 "Blood Friday" massacre following security forces' violent suppression of protesters in Zahedan in September 2022.[26] Jaish al Adl is an anti-regime militant group that operates around the Iran-Pakistan border region and regularly conducts attacks against Iranian regime security forces.[27]

Israel-based i24News claimed on July 16 that Armenia has used Iranian Shahed drones in several recent clashes with Azerbaijan. Iran may expand its military support to Armenia in response to Russian "negligence" toward the Caucasus.[28] CTP cannot independently verify this claim. This claim is consistent with former IRGC Commander Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi's assertion in October 2022 that 22 countries, including Armenia, sought to buy Iranian drones.[29] The claim also follows senior Iranian security and foreign policy officials' articulation of the regime's comprehensive perspective on threats emanating from the Caucasus in recent days. [30] Supreme Leader Foreign Policy Advisor Ali Akbar Velayati warned Russia about possible NATO interference and aggression in the Caucasus following Turkey's approval of Sweden's

NATO ascension on July 10.[31] Velayati argued that Russia has abandoned the Caucasus since its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and needs to be cognizant of the potential for conflict and competition in the region.[32]

Iran's provision of drones to Armenia would indicate that Iran perceives Azerbaijan—as well as its Turkish ally—as a growing threat. Iran holds numerous grievances against Azerbaijan and Turkey. Regime officials have frequently accused Baku of allowing Israel to use Azerbaijani territory to launch operations against Iran.[33] The regime additionally opposes Azerbaijan and Turkey's efforts to establish a corridor between Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic in Armenia. Such a corridor would directly connect Azerbaijan to eastern Turkey and hamper Iranian economic access to European and Russian markets.[34] Iranian officials and media previously accused Israel of using Azerbaijan as an intelligence base to instigate protests during the Mahsa Amini movement.[35]

Iran's provision of drones to Armenia would be part of the regime's larger effort to leverage arms sales to generate revenue for the Iranian economy.[36] Armed Forces General Staff Chief Major General Mohammad Bagheri stated on May 31 that Iran will export its military capabilities to “friendly countries.”[37] Bagheri also called on Foreign Affairs Ministry officials to relay Iran's willingness to export its defense capabilities to foreign dignitaries. Iran's inflation rate hovers around 50 percent and the Iranian rial is currently valued at 491,500 rials to one US dollar.[38]

The Iranian Law Enforcement Command (LEC) resumed the country-wide deployment of its morality patrol officers to enforce mandatory veiling on July 16. The morality patrol enforces dress codes that adhere to the regime's standards and is the unit responsible for arresting and killing Mahsa Amini in September 2022.[39] Iranian security officials previously announced in March 2023 that they would use morality patrols—specifically in Qom Province—to enforce the mandatory hijab law after Prosecutor General Mohammad Javad Montazeri stated on December 3 that the LEC had reduced its number of patrols.[40] Western media outlets inaccurately framed Montazeri's statement as the morality patrol's abolishment and a concession to Mahsa Amini protesters.[41]

The regime is very unlikely to abolish the veiling law, as Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has repeatedly identified mandatory veiling as a red line. 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. The regime views enforced veiling as one of the foundations of its Islamic identity and authority. 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.

The resumption of the morality patrol will likely reignite anti-regime sentiments among large segments of the Iranian populous. The violent enforcement of mandatory veiling that resulted in the death of Mahsa Amini resulted in months of anti-regime protests. A 2019 parliamentary report stated that 70 percent of Iranian women favored relaxing dress codes.

The resumed deployment of the morality patrol will also likely deepen the intra-regime fissures created by the Mahsa Amini movement. Hardliners have criticized the Raisi administration's failed hijab bill for being too lenient and some Iranians have demonstrated against relaxing mandatory veiling in recent days. Judiciary First Deputy Hojjat ol Eslam Mohammad Mossadegh expressed surprise that unspecified clerics were weary of the government's role in enforcing modesty standards on July 12, suggesting that veiling enforcement has also created fissures between hardliners and the clerical establishment.[42]

President Ebrahim Raisi inaugurated the Cham Shir dam in Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad Province on July 17, which Iranian media described as the largest hydro-electric project in the country.[43] The Cham Shir dam will improve the quality of and control flooding from the Zahra River. Several environmentalists have warned of the negative ramifications of this dam. Five

Iranian cities separately recorded temperatures of above and around 122 degrees Fahrenheit on July 15 and the Persian Gulf Airport in Asalouyeh, Bushehr Province recorded a heat index of 150 degrees Fahrenheit on July 16.[44] Iranian media additionally circulated reports that Lake Ouroumiyeh had reached its lowest level in 60 years and warned of an impending environmental disaster on July 16.[45] CTP assessed on June 30 that Iran's worsening water crisis is creating a number of internal security and humanitarian issues--such as increased food insecurity and internal migration--which will likely fuel greater popular unrest in the coming years.[46]

Iran Update, July 18, 2023

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Ashka Jhaveri, Andie Parry, Annika Ganzeveld, Amin Soltani and Kitaneh Fitzpatrick

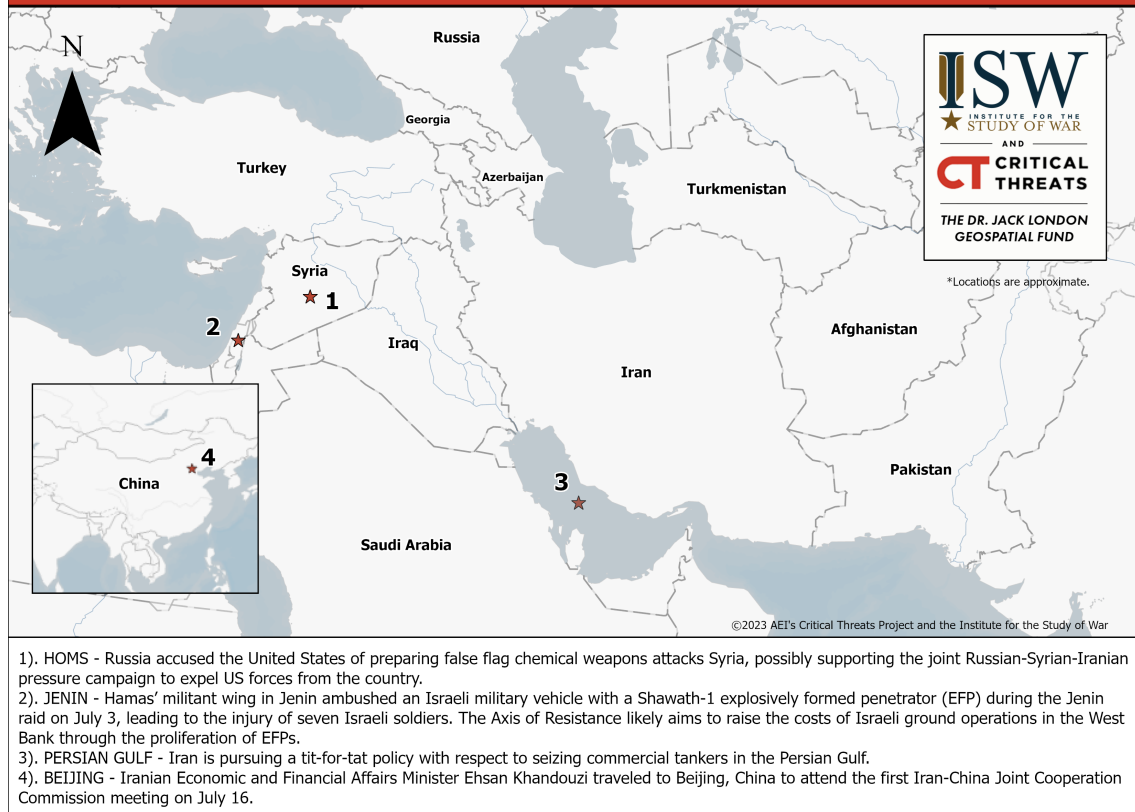
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Key Takeaways

1. Russia accused the United States of preparing false flag chemical weapons attacks against Syria, possibly supporting the joint Russian-Syrian-Iranian pressure campaign to expel US forces from the country.
2. Hamas' militant wing in Jenin ambushed an Israeli military vehicle with a Shawath-1 explosively formed penetrator (EFP) during the Jenin raid on July 3, leading to the injury of seven Israeli soldiers. The Axis of Resistance likely aims to raise the costs of Israeli ground operations in the West Bank through the proliferation of EFPs.
3. Iran is pursuing a tit-for-tat policy with respect to seizing commercial tankers in the Persian Gulf.
4. Iranian Economic and Financial Affairs Minister Ehsan Khandouzi traveled to Beijing, China to attend the first Iran-China Joint Cooperation Commission meeting on July 16.

Iran Update | July 18, 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 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.

Russia accused the United States of preparing false flag chemical weapons attacks against Syria, possibly supporting the joint Russian-Syrian-Iranian pressure campaign to expel US forces from the country. Russian Troops of Radiological, Chemical, and Biological Defense and the Syrian Arab Army specialists organized a military exercise in the desert between July 16-18 adjacent to the 55-kilometer deconfliction zone that surrounds the US Al Tanf garrison.[1] The exercise simulated a battle in which US-affiliated forces use chemical weapons. The soldiers learned how to operate the RPO-A Shmel, which is a man-portable, single-use, rocket-assisted thermobaric weapon, in a chemical environment.[2] Russia strategically places military exercises to influence adversaries.[3] US President Joe Biden said the United States eliminated its entire chemical weapons stockpile on July 7.[4] The military exercise followed Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) Director Sergey Naryshkin accusing the United States on July 3 of using false flag attacks to undermine Syrian normalization attempts with the Arab world.[5] The Russian Ministry of Defense accused the United States in 2018 of preparing false flag chemical attacks against civilians in Syria.[6] Naryshkin's comments preceded rumored International Coalition attacks into regime-controlled territory triggering a surge beginning on July 7 of Iranian-backed, Russian-backed, and Syrian regime militants deploying to eastern Syria.

CTP has observed Iran preparing to resume its campaign to expel US forces from the Middle East since early June. Comments from a senior US defense official on July 14 about growing ties between Iran, Russia, and Syria across the Middle East are consistent with CTP's observations.[7] The official noted Russian military activity has increased in frequency and aggression since March and stems from growing cooperation between Moscow, Tehran, and the Syrian government. Russian military aircrafts have repeatedly engaged US aircrafts over Syria in an unprofessional manner, violating deconfliction protocols. A Russian fighter jet flew close a manned US

surveillance aircraft over Syria on July 17.[8] US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley said there is no evidence that the Russian engagement with US aircrafts is linked to Ukraine, which suggests that the flights pertain to Russia's objectives regarding Syria.[9] CTP will follow up in tomorrow's update with an assessment about how Iran and Russia may be amplifying rumored International Coalition attacks as part of a campaign to expel US forces from Syria.

Hamas' militant wing in Jenin ambushed an Israeli military vehicle with a Shawath-1 explosively formed penetrator (EFP) during the Jenin raid on July 3, leading to the injury of seven Israeli soldiers.[10] The attack was the first use of an EFP in the West Bank. The group announced on July 15 that it manufactured the EPFs in the West Bank.[11] Hamas has manufactured and used EPFs in Gaza since 2007.[12] Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) outlet *Al Mayadeen* stated that the Shawath-1 EPFs' similarity to devices used by LH and Iraqi militants in the 2000s "indicates a possible growing collaboration between various parties in the axis of resistance." [13] *Al Mayadeen* also framed the EFP production by Hamas in the West Bank as a major breakthrough in the engineering capabilities of Palestinian groups.[14] EPFs require specially manufactured concave copper disks, indicating Hamas militants either imported or received the specific instruction and capacity to produce the disks. Iran manufactured and facilitated distribution of the copper disks to Iraqi militants for use against US forces in Iraq.[15]

Israeli military officials framed the July 3 to 5 Jenin operation as a strategic and preventive measure to degrade Palestinian militant capabilities.[16] The IDF claimed the Jenin raid destroyed several Palestinian command-and-control centers, six explosives laboratories with more than 14 improvised explosive devices, and weapons caches with small arms and explosive materials.[17] Hamas' militant wing in Jenin claimed it still possessed EPFs after the raid.

The Axis of Resistance likely aims to raise the costs of Israeli ground operations in the West Bank through the proliferation of EFPs. Israel's reduced access to the West Bank would enable Iran to help rebuild degraded Palestinian militant groups and military capacities, as CTP previously assessed it intended to do.[18] Denying Israel access to Jenin and other militant hotbeds would strengthen Palestinian militants' ability to target Israel in ground operations. These aims are consistent with comments from Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Commander Hossein Salami, who stated in August 2022 that the IRGC intends to increasingly focus on directing ground operations against Israel from the West Bank.[19]

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 pursuing a tit-for-tat policy with respect to seizing commercial tankers in the Persian Gulf. IRGC Navy Deputy Commander for Research and Development Rear Admiral Ahmad Rasti stated on July 18 that Iran has seized commercial tankers in response to Western seizures of Iranian tankers.[20] Rasti noted Iran seized British and Greek tankers in 2019 and 2022, respectively, because Britain and Greece had seized Iranian ships and cargo. The *Wall Street Journal* reported that recent Iranian seizures of commercial tankers in the Persian Gulf were in response to the US seizure of a Greek-owned tanker carrying Iranian oil in late April.[21] The report is consistent with previous Western media reporting.[22]

The United States deployed several F-16 and F-35 fighter jets and the guided-missile destroyer *USS Thomas Hudner* to the Persian Gulf between July 14 and 17 to deter further Iranian tanker seizures.[23] The Artesh Navy attempted to seize two commercial tankers in the Strait of Hormuz on July 5 and the IRGC Navy seized another in the Persian Gulf on July 6.[24] The US Department of Defense similarly announced on May 12 that it would bolster the Fifth Fleet's defensive posture in the Persian Gulf after Iran seized three international vessels in the Strait of Hormuz between April 27 and May 12.[25]

Iranian Economic and Financial Affairs Minister Ehsan Khandouzi traveled to Beijing, China to attend the first Iran-China Joint Cooperation Commission meeting on July 16.[26]

Representatives of Iran's oil, agriculture, roads and urban development, foreign affairs, and industry, mines, and trade ministries accompanied Khandouzi.[27] Representatives of Iran's Central Bank also attended the commission meeting. Khandouzi presented several "priority investment projects" covering energy, industry, mining, agriculture, and healthcare to Chinese officials. Khandouzi remarked that Chinese officials "promised" to eliminate unspecified "barriers" to Iranian trade with China. This statement suggests that Iran and China's economic relationship in recent months has not been as harmonious as Iranian officials and media frequently portray.[28]

Iran seeks numerous economic benefits from China. The *New York Times*, citing a draft of the March 2021 Iran-China 25-Year Cooperation Agreement, previously reported that China agreed to invest 400 billion dollars in Iran over 25 years in exchange for Iranian oil.[29] China will invest in numerous fields, including banking, telecommunications, ports, railways, health care, and information technology. Iran has sought Chinese investment in numerous infrastructure projects, including, most recently, in a Chinese-Iranian-Afghan railway corridor.[30]

Iran additionally seeks to use its recent ascension into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)—which is headed by China and Russia—to advance its economic interests. CTP previously assessed that Iran's membership in the SCO may enable it to circumvent sanctions through non-US dollar financial transactions with other SCO countries.[31] Iranian officials view the SCO as a means of advancing Iran's efforts to compensate for Iran's dwindling foreign currency reserves by conducting economic exchanges in local currencies. Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi called on SCO members to abandon the US dollar in financial transactions during his speech at the 23rd SCO Summit on July 4.[32] Foreign Affairs Ministry Economic Diplomacy Deputy Mehdi Safari previously proposed in June 2022 that the SCO should use a single currency, much like how the European Union uses the euro.[33]

The presence of representatives of Iran's agriculture ministry at the Iran-China Joint Cooperation Commission meeting suggests Iran is pursuing greater agricultural cooperation with China. Iran is pursuing extraterritorial cultivation in various countries to conserve water it would usually use for agriculture. President Ebrahim Raisi recently attended the launch of "Iran's extraterritorial cultivation in Uganda" on July 12, for example.[34] China is a major producer of rice, which Iran has struggled to produce in recent years due to worsening water shortages.[35]

Iran Update, July 19, 2023

Iran Update, July 19, 2023

Amin Soltani, Ashka Jhaveri, and Annika Ganzeveld

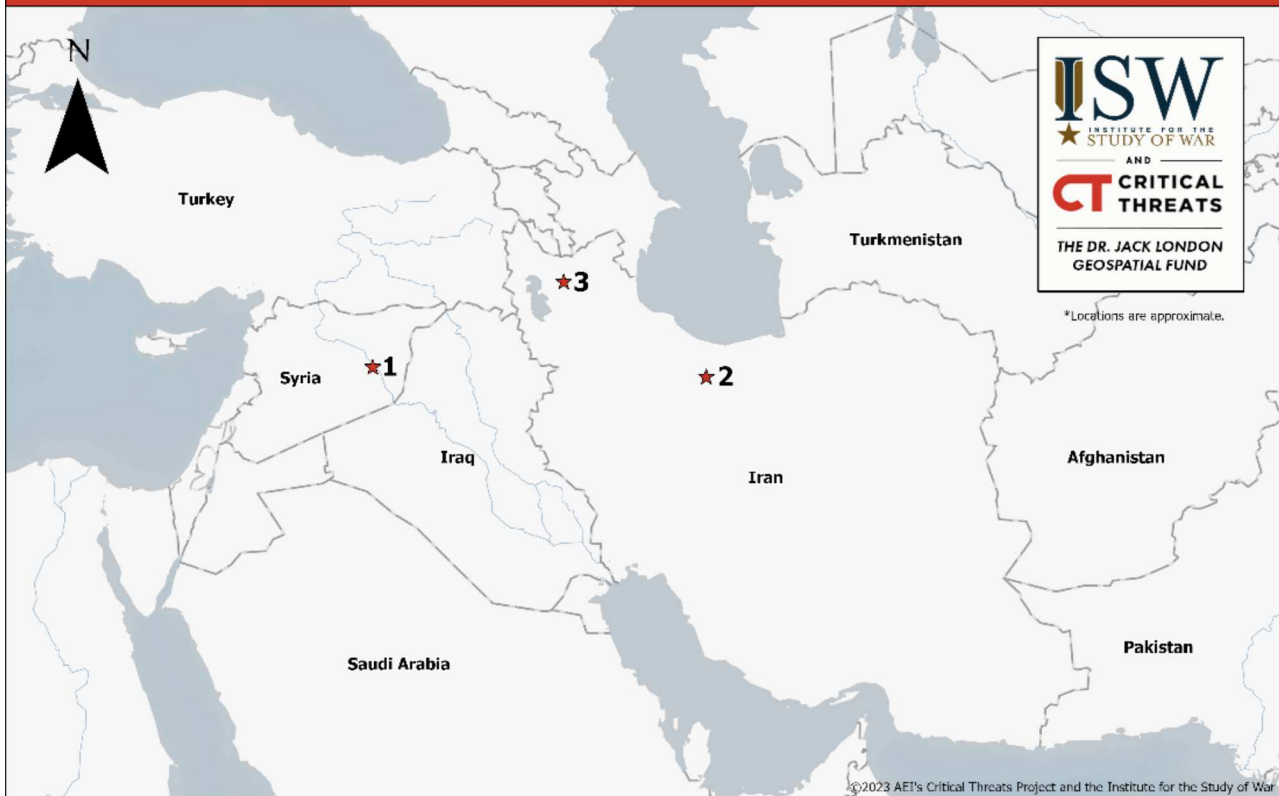
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The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) with support from the Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute launched a [new interactive map of Iran and the Middle East](#). The map depicts events in Iran that affect the stability 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.

Key Takeaways

1. Iran and Russia are amplifying rumors of International Coalition attacks into Syrian regime territory likely as part of a campaign to expel US forces from Syria.
2. The British Secret Intelligence Service revealed on July 19 that Iran seeks to acquire cash from Russia in return for Iranian drones.
3. The IRGC Ground Forces conducted a military exercise near Iran's border with Azerbaijan on July 19. Iranian officials have articulated a series of demands against Azerbaijan, which largely focus on Baku halting its anti-Iran cooperation with Israel and Turkey.

Iran Update | July 19, 2023



1. DEIR EZ ZOR - Iran and Russia are amplifying rumors of International Coalition attacks into Syrian regime territory likely as part of a campaign to expel US forces from Syria.
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Iranian Activities in the Levant

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

Iran and Russia are amplifying rumors of International Coalition attacks into Syrian regime territory likely as part of a campaign to expel US forces from Syria. A rumor spread in eastern Syria in late June that the US-led International Coalition is going launch an attack into regime-controlled territory. Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) deployed to lines of contact with the Assad regime on July 7 which triggered Iran and the Syrian regime to surge fighters to the province. [1] The SDF told the Syrian regime and Russian officials that it does not intend to take control over regime-controlled territory following the surge of activity.[2] Iran and Russia continued to deploy forces to eastern Syria and frame the International Coalition as an imminent threat despite the SDF's claims.[3] Their framing of US forces as an imminent threat is consistent with classified documents leaked on the Discord messaging platform which highlighted US opponent plan to stoke popular resistance and support grass-roots movement to carry out attacks against Americans in Syria.[4] The report noted the construction of an Iranian-Russian "coordination center" in Syria to direct the new campaign in Syria. A US senior defense official said on July 14 that the United States is increasingly concerned about growing ties between Iran, Russia, and Syria.[5]

Examples of the steps Iran and Russia have taken to amplify the rumors include:

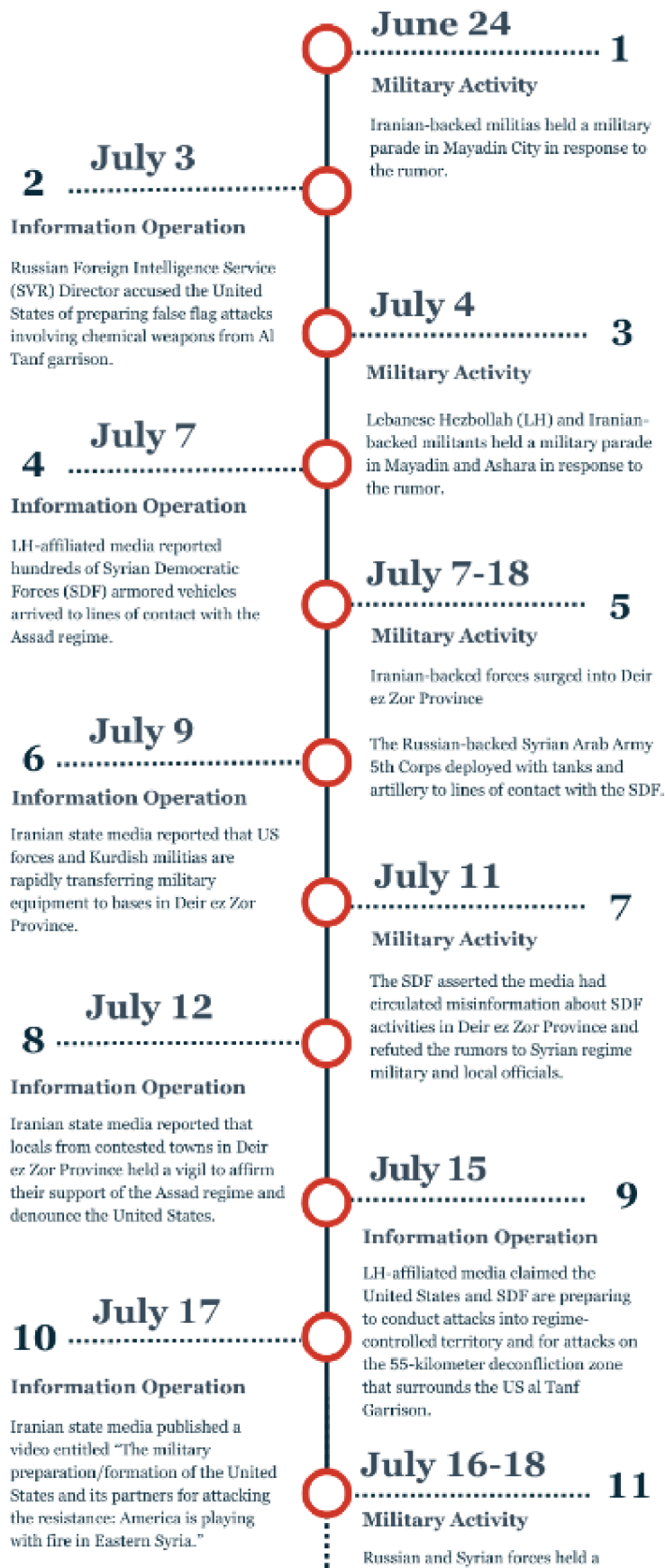
- Iranian-backed militants have conducted multiple military parades in major populated locations of Deir ez Zor province in late June and throughout July.[6] Iranian state

media has emphasized the narrative that the United States and its affiliated Kurdish militias are fortifying its positioning in eastern Syria to prepare for an attack into Syrian regime territory.[7]

- CTP previously reported that Russian Troops of Radiological, Chemical, and Biological Defense and the Syrian Arab Army specialists organized a military exercise between July 16-18 simulating a US-ordered chemical attack in the Syrian desert.[8]
- Iranian state media has reported throughout July on the deployments of US forces to eastern Syria on its Persian, Arabic, and English websites which suggests that the targeted audience is both domestic and foreign.[9]

Military Activities and Information Operations in Eastern Syria

Iran and Russia are amplifying rumors of International Coalition attacks into Syrian regime territory likely as part of a campaign to expel US forces from Syria.



Timeline sources[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.

The British Secret Intelligence Service revealed on July 19 that Iran seeks to acquire cash from Russia in return for Iranian drones.[11] The information is consistent with previous Iranian diaspora media reporting that Russia has paid Iran nearly 900 million US dollars for Iranian drone technology.[12] Diaspora media also reported that Iran only accepted US dollars—not Russian rubles or gold—for its drones. It is unclear whether Iran has always demanded cash for its military support for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Western media previously speculated that Iran could receive Russian military equipment, including Su-35 fighter jets, in return for supplying Russia with drones.[13]

The IRGC Ground Forces conducted a military exercise near Iran’s border with Azerbaijan on July 19.[14] Armed Forces General Staff Chief Major General Mohammad Bagheri stated on the sidelines of the exercise that Iran’s armed forces are prepared to take “powerful” actions if Azerbaijan does not address Iran’s security concerns.[15] Bagheri and other senior military officials also assessed the combat readiness of Iranian forces on the border between July 17 and 19. [16] Artesh Commander Major General Abdol Rahim Mousavi similarly stated on July 17 that Iran is aware of all threats emanating from anti-regime enemies and has “a plan for them.”[17] Iran has conducted annual military exercises on the border with Azerbaijan starting in 2021 after tensions increased between Tehran and Baku over the latter’s ties to Turkey and Israel.[18] The IRGC separately deployed equipment and troops near the border in October 2021 after Azerbaijan, Turkey and Pakistan conducted a military exercise in Baku.[19] This year’s July 19 exercise was conducted earlier than expected as these exercises have historically occurred in October.

Iranian officials have articulated a series of demands against Azerbaijan, which largely focus on Baku halting its anti-Iran cooperation with Israel and Turkey. Regime officials have frequently accused Baku of allowing Israel to use Azerbaijani territory to launch operations against Iran.[20] The regime additionally opposes Azerbaijan and Turkey’s efforts to establish a corridor between Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic in Armenia. Such a corridor would directly connect Azerbaijan to eastern Turkey and hamper Iranian economic access to European and Russian markets.[21] Turkey and Azerbaijan have also stalled Iranian efforts to feed its gas into the existing pipelines built by the Azerbaijanis that travel through Turkish territory before arriving in Europe via the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC).[22] Iranian officials and media previously accused Israel of using Azerbaijan as an intelligence base to instigate protests during the Mahsa Amini movement.[23]

Iran has also signaled that it is prepared to arm Azerbaijan’s adversaries if the former does not accede to Iran’s demands. Israel-based *i24News* claimed on July 16 that Armenia has used Iranian Shahed drones in several recent clashes with Azerbaijan.[24] This claim is consistent with former IRGC Commander Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi’s assertion in October 2022 that 22 countries, including Armenia, sought to buy Iranian drones.[25]

Iran’s military signaling follows senior Iranian security and foreign policy officials’ articulation of the regime’s comprehensive perspective on threats emanating from the Caucasus in recent days. Supreme Leader Military Affairs Advisor and former IRGC Commander Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi expressed concern on July 12 about Western attempts to sow discord in the Caucasus by making geopolitical changes in the region.[26] Supreme Leader Foreign Policy Advisor Ali Akbar Velayati similarly warned Russia on July 13 about possible NATO interference and aggression in the Caucasus.[27] Velayati argued that the change in Turkey’s policies vis-à-vis

NATO, such as agreeing to approve Sweden's NATO ascension, and Turkey's links to Azerbaijan, raises the risk of conflict in the Caucasus region. He highlighted that such conflict will lead to long-term tensions in the region that Iran's adversaries—specifically the United States and Israel—will exploit to “undermine the security of the entire region.” Velayati furthermore warned Russia that Turkey's pan-Turkic aspirations to connect areas where Turkic populations reside between Istanbul and Xinjiang could create an area in which NATO influence spreads and geographically separates Iran and Russia. Both countries have been concerned since the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War that pan-Turkic rhetoric will prompt Turkic secessionist movements in Iran and Russia.[28]

Iran Update, July 20, 2023

Iran Update, July 20, 2023

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

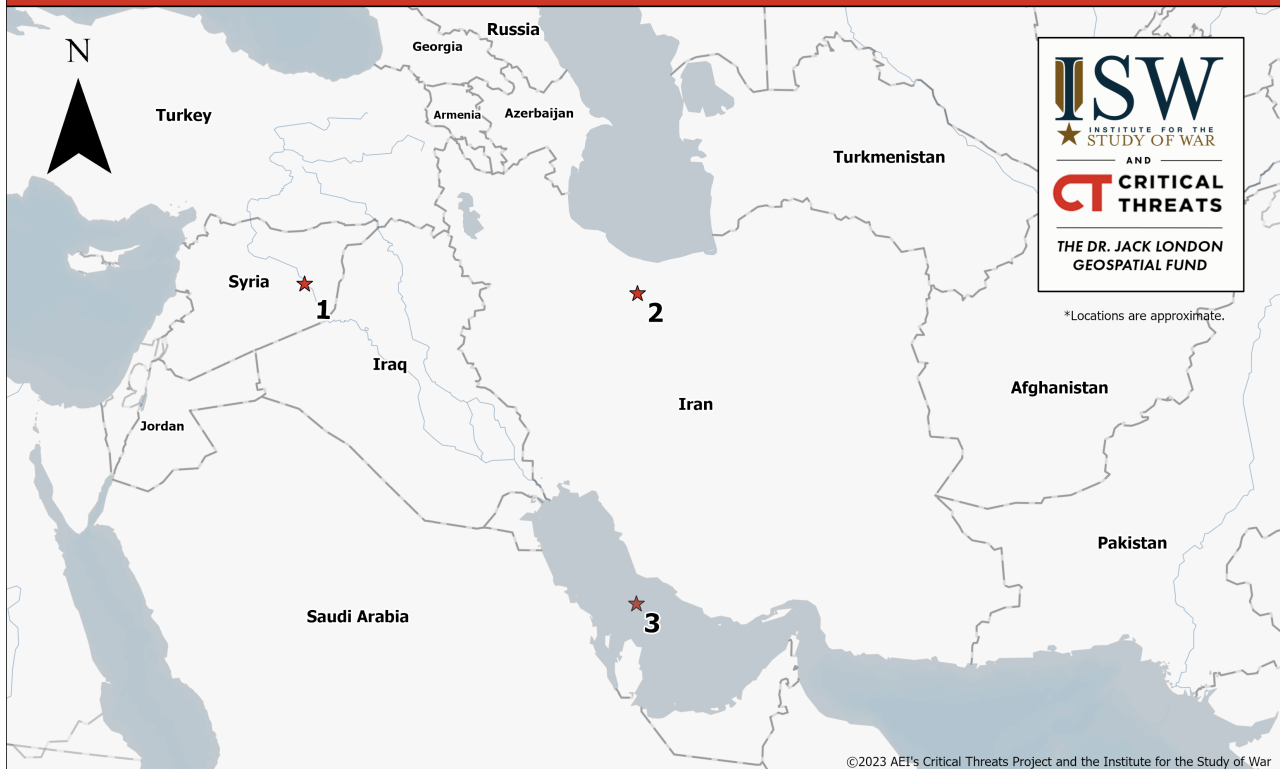
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Key Takeaways

1. Iran, Russia, and the Syrian regime are coordinating military operations in eastern Syria likely as part of a coercive campaign to expel the United States from Syria.
2. Iranian Minister of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Ashtiani signed a defense and security memorandum of understanding (MoU) with his Bolivian counterpart Edmundo Novillo Aguilar in Tehran on July 20. Iran may seek to sell drones to Bolivia as part of this MOU.
3. IRGC Navy Commander Rear Admiral Ali Reza Tangsiri threatened that Iran will hold the United States and US companies responsible for confiscating and unloading Iranian oil, possibly signaling Iran will harass or seize US commercial and military vessels in the Gulf.

Iran Update | July 20, 2023



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Iranian Activities in the Levant

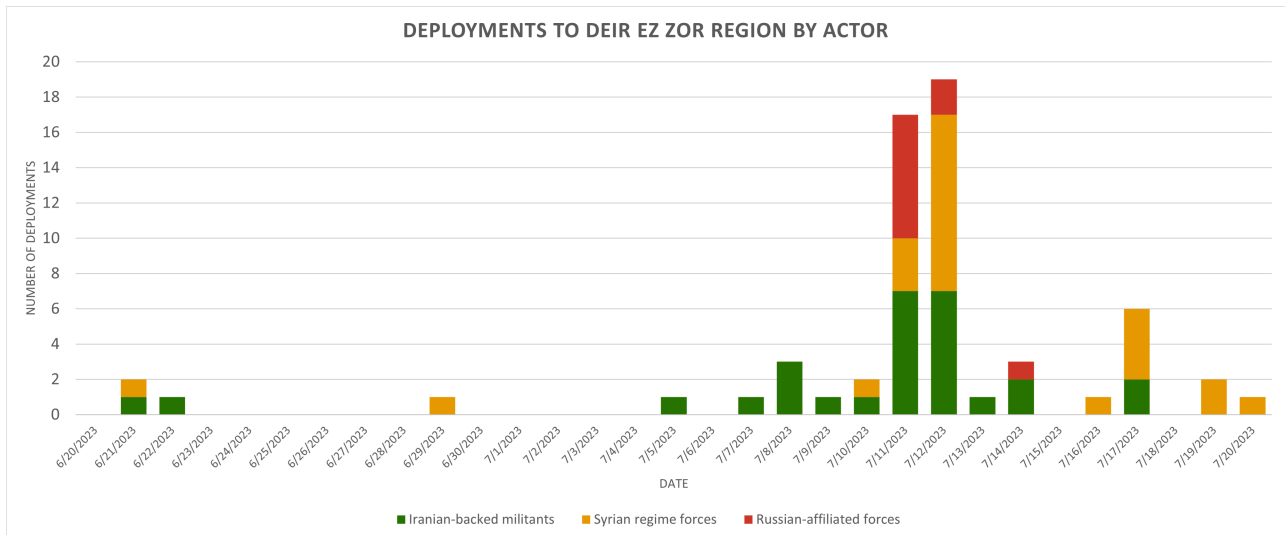
This section covers Iranian efforts to consolidate and expand Tehran's economic, military, and political influence throughout the Levant especially in Syria. This section examines some of the many campaigns that Iran is pursuing to achieve this strategic objective. CTP will update and refine our assessments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

Iran, Russia, and the Syrian regime are coordinating military operations in eastern Syria likely as part of a coercive campaign to expel the United States from Syria.[1] Iran and the Syrian regime have surged forces and materiel to eastern Syria since July 7 under the auspices of defending against a rumored US- Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) offensive into regime-controlled territory. They have done so despite statements from the SDF to Syrian officials and Russian officials that its actions in eastern Syria are non-emergency operations to eliminate ISIS cells. [2] The surge of Iranian and Syrian forces to eastern Syria has occurred through greater coordination with Russia, which began last November when Iran, Russia, and Syria agreed to establish a “coordination center” for a campaign to expel US forces from Syria.[3] An unspecified US DoD official asserted that recent aggressive Russian military activity aimed at US forces in Syria is part of that campaign.[4]

- The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force (IRGC QF) has directed militia deployments to Deir ez Zor, primarily to lines of control with the SDF in Deir ez Zor City, since early July.[5] It has coordinated operational planning with the militia leaders, overseen arms transfers—including rockets and anti-aircraft systems—and instructed Iranian-backed militias to reinforce headquarters and storage facilities in the province. [6] The IRGC QF also has raised militant salaries by 13 percent as part of an expanded recruitment effort.[7]
- Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and Syrian Republican Guards deployed reinforcements from Damascus and the surrounding Deir ez Zor area to eastern Syria.[8] The SAA brought

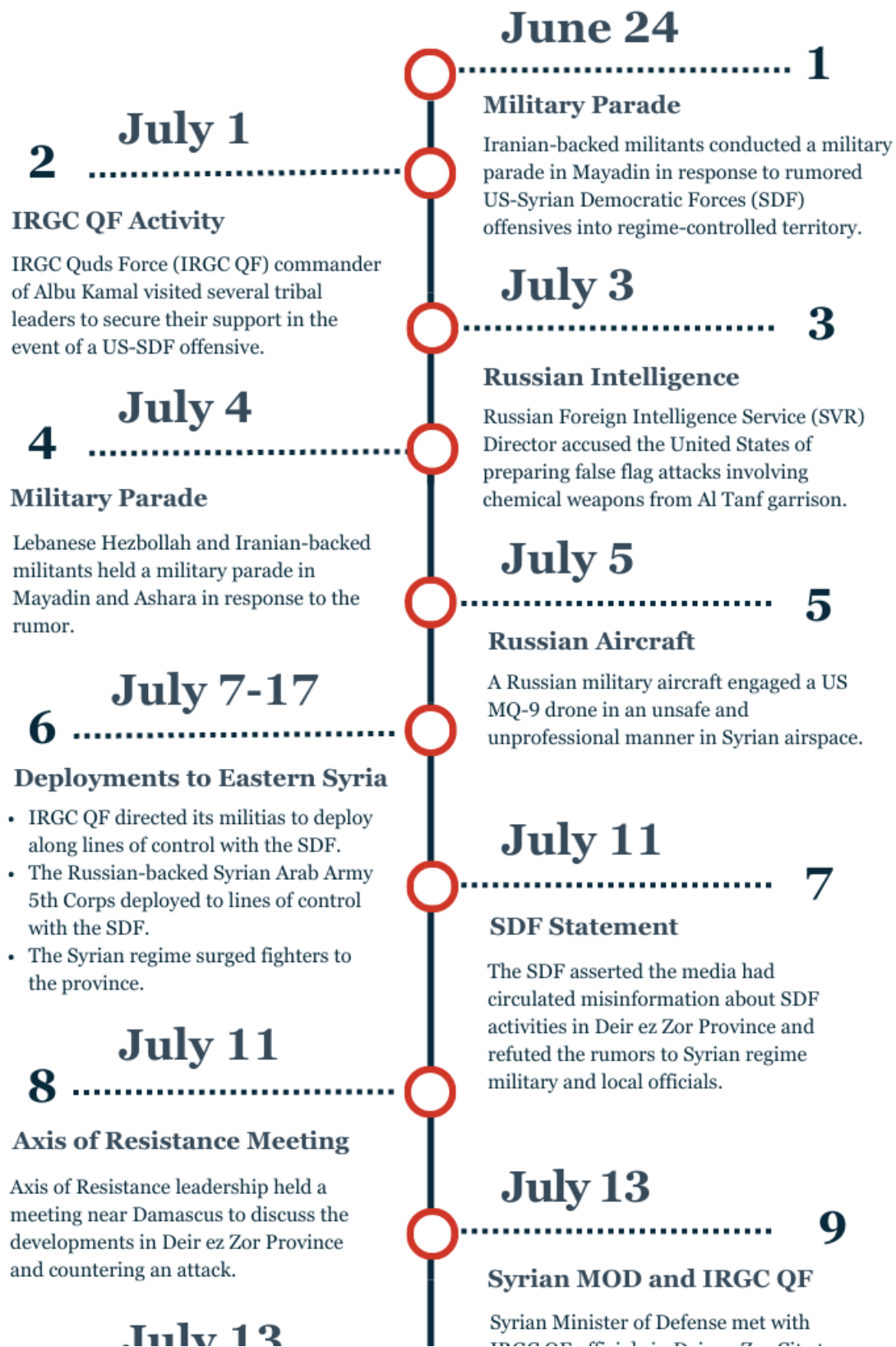
tanks and anti-aircraft weapons to Albu Kamal and Mayadin.[9] The SAA 5th Corps, which Russia helped form and backs, also deployed tanks and personnel to lines of control with the SDF.[10] The Syrian Minister of Defense led a delegation of Syrian officials, including the deputy of the SAA Fourth Division, to Deir ez Zor City on July 11, which suggests regime forces remained on high alert for an attack.[11]

- US Air Force Central Command noted that Russian aircraft had become more aggressive toward US forces in Syria in 2022 and drastically stepped-up airspace violations in March 2023.[12] Russia also has contributed to the messaging about an imminent US threat in Syria. Russia claimed on July 3 that the United States brought chemical weapons into Syria to conduct false flag attacks.[13] Russian forces held a military exercise with the SAA from July 16-18 near the 55-kilometer deconfliction zone that surrounds the US Al Tanf garrison that simulated a US chemical weapon attack.[14]



Significant Activity in Eastern Syria

Iran, Russia, and the Syrian regime are coordinating military operations in eastern Syria likely as part of a coercive campaign to expel the United States from Syria.





Timeline sources[15]

Iranian, Syrian, and Russian deployment acceleration to locations along the Euphrates River in conjunction with the coordinated information campaign raises the risk of unauthorized strikes into SDF territory in the near term. CTP recorded four low level skirmishes between SAA and SDF forces between July 10 and 13.[16] CTP previously explained that it is not uncommon for regime and SDF forces to have limited clashes like these four instances. However, these clashes highlight the risk that regular smaller level disputes could expand to include US or regime-aligned forces.

The warnings of an imminent US-led attack into Syrian regime territory coupled with mobilization of regime-aligned forces has cultivated an environment in eastern Syria that could motivate locals to form anti-US militias or attack US interests. Iranian, Syrian, and Russian sources circulated threats that the US and allied forces in Syria intended to launch an offensive to retake regime held towns.[17] CTP first recorded these rumors in late June. By July 8 the rumors had grown to assert that the United States also intended to retake territory spanning from al Tanf Garrison, north through Raqqa, and extending east to the Albu Kamal border crossing.[18] Civilians evacuated Albu Kamal in response to these rumors, which demonstrates the local-level concern about armed conflict between the US-backed coalition and Iranian, Syrian, and Russian forces.[19] The coordinated Iranian-Syrian-Russia information operation also aims degrade perceptions of the United States among locals in eastern Syria. This is in line with the *Washington Post's* report that US adversaries in Syria are seeking to cultivate a grassroots opposition to the United States.[20]

CTP is considering several scenarios about how Iran and the Syrian regime could use their current force dispositions in Deir ez Zor Province threaten US interests in Syria. The scenarios are not

mutually exclusive. Iran and the Syrian regime have the option to pursue more than one at a time or multiple scenarios sequentially.

- **Iran and the Syrian regime mount a ground incursion into SDF territory.** The mobilization of militia and regime forces along the SDF contact line would enable Iran and the Syrian regime to launch a conventional ground assault into SDF territory or disputed areas. Iranian disinformation campaigns targeted at Arab locals weaken local support for the US force presence and help Iran mount a ground offensive of SAA and proxy militias and encounter less resistance from US-backed ground forces. By launching a grassroots attack at the SDF, Iran would maintain strategic depth by not directly attacking US forces.
- **Iran could direct an attack on US forces.** Iran has the option to direct Iranian-backed forces in Deir ez Zor to attack US forces at the Conoco Mission Support Site and Green Village, which are less than 10 kilometers from mobilized Iranian proxies. Iran would be able to direct rocket attacks, for which there is significant precedence, or could direct sleeper cells to target US forces with EFPs in an escalation from their previous tactics against US forces in Syria.[21] Iranian-backed militia rocket attacks on Conoco and Green Village in 2023 have all been launched from positions farther away than the current Iranian-backed militia deployments, meaning Iranian attacks would cause greater damage.
- **Iran refrains from an attack against the United States and SDF.** The rumor of an imminent US attack in Deir ez Zor against civilians is part of an Iranian campaign to cast the United States as an expansive and threatening force in the Middle East.[22] Iran has the option to continue this information operation to expand local opposition to the US presence in Syria and support Iranian efforts to recruit local Syrians into its militias. This would increase the risk of an attack on US interests and forces from local Syrian militants.

Iranian Domestic and Political Affairs

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Iranian Minister of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Ashtiani signed a defense and security memorandum of understanding (MoU) with his Bolivian counterpart Edmundo Novillo Aguilar in Tehran on July 20.[23] Iran may seek to sell drones to Bolivia as part of this MOU. Ashtiani stated on July 19 that Iran's defense industry can provide Bolivia with "advanced technology." [24] Ashtiani separately stated on July 20 that Iran can help Bolivia with "border control" and "confronting drug smuggling." [25] Drones are frequently used to bolster border security and combat smuggling. [26] Iran has sought to increase the number of countries that buy Iranian drones in recent years. [27] Former IRGC Commander Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi boasted in October 2022 that 22 countries—including Algeria, Armenia, Serbia, Tajikistan, and Venezuela—had submitted formal requests for Iranian drones. [28] President Ebrahim Raisi additionally promoted Iranian drone technology during several recent foreign trips, including during his most recent trip to Kenya, Uganda, and Zimbabwe between July 12-14. [29]

Iran is seeking to increase defense exports to generate revenue for the Iranian economy. Armed Forces General Staff Chief Major General Mohammad Bagheri emphasized on May 31 that Iran will export its military capabilities to "friendly" countries. [30] Bagheri also called on Foreign Affairs Ministry officials to relay Iran's willingness to export its defense capabilities to foreign dignitaries on May 30. [31] Iran is currently facing critical economic conditions, with the value of the rial hovering slightly below 500,000 rials to one US dollar. [32] Iranian media, citing the Iran Statistical Center, reported on May 25 that Iran's inflation rate is approximately 46.1 percent. [33]

IRGC Navy Commander Rear Admiral Ali Reza Tangsiri threatened that Iran will hold the United States and US companies responsible for confiscating and unloading Iranian oil,

possibly signaling Iran will harass or seize US commercial and military vessels in the Gulf. [34] Iran seized three international vessels in the Strait of Hormuz between April 27 and May 12, after which the US Department of Defense announced that it would bolster the Fifth Fleet's defensive posture in the Persian Gulf.[35] The IRGC Navy then conducted unprofessional and unsafe maneuvers near a US naval ship in the Persian Gulf on May 19.[36] The Artesh Navy attempted to seize two commercial tankers in the Strait of Hormuz on July 5 and the IRGC Navy seized another in the Persian Gulf on July 6.[37] The United States similarly deployed several F-16 and F-35 fighter jets and the guided-missile destroyer *USS Thomas Hudner* to the Persian Gulf between July 14 and 17 to deter further Iranian tanker seizures.[38]

Tangsiri is attempting to deter both further US seizures of vessels carrying Iranian oil as well as the unloading of Iranian oil from the *Suez Rajan*, which the United States seized in late April. The *Wall Street Journal* reported on July 18 that US companies fear Iranian retaliation and are hesitant to unload Iranian oil from the tanker.[39] The *Journal* also reported that recent Iranian seizures of commercial tankers in the Persian Gulf were in response to the US seizure of the Greek-owned tanker. IRGC Navy Deputy Commander for Research and Development Rear Admiral Ahmad Rasti stated on July 18 that Iran has seized commercial tankers in response to Western seizures of Iranian tankers, demonstrating that Iran is pursuing a tit-for-tat policy in this regard.[40]

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Iran Update, July 21, 2023

Iran Update, July 21, 2023

Ashka Jhaveri, Andie Parry, Amin Soltani, Annika Ganzeveld, Kitaneh Fitzpatrick, Alexa Albanese, Alexander Coffen, and Radhika Bhargava

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.

Key Takeaways

1. Iranian-backed militias transferred air defense weapons to eastern Syria, which likely will jeopardize the US-led International Coalition mission to defeat ISIS.
2. Iran expanded judicial cooperation with Syria, likely as part of a policy of building institutional links with regional allies.
3. CIA Director William Burns stated on July 20 that Russian technicians are assisting with the Iranian Space Launch Vehicle and missile program inside Iran. Russian assistance could advance Iran's development of inter-continental ballistic missiles and a military space program that would enhance Iran's intelligence gathering capabilities.
4. BRICS has invited Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi to attend its 15th summit in Johannesburg, South Africa in late August.

Iran Update | July 21, 2023



- 1). DEIR EZ ZOR - Iranian-backed militias transferred air defense weapons to eastern Syria, which likely will jeopardize the US-led International Coalition mission to defeat ISIS.
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- 3). TEHRAN - CIA Director William Burns stated on July 20 that Russian technicians are assisting with the Iranian Space Launch Vehicle and missile program inside Iran. Russian assistance could advance Iran's development of inter-continental ballistic missiles and a military space program that would enhance Iran's intelligence gathering capabilities.
- 4). TEHRAN - BRICS has invited Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi to attend its 15th summit in Johannesburg, South Africa in late August.

Iranian Activities in the Levant

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

Iranian-backed militias transferred air defense weapons to eastern Syria, which likely will jeopardize the US-led International Coalition mission to defeat ISIS. Some militias including Lebanese Hezbollah deployed air defense guns and man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADs) such as the Misagh-1 to eastern Syria.[1] *The Washington Post* reported on June 1 that Iran has been building and training forces to target and kill US personnel and expel US forces from Syria, according to classified documents leaked on the Discord messaging platform.[2] CTP previously reported that the air defense weapons Iran has transferred to Syria are effective for targeting helicopters.[3] Iranian-backed militias could use them to limit US air-support and restrict maneuvering in Syria. Read ISW's "Salafi Jihadi Movement Update Special Edition: Iran, Russia, and Syrian Prioritization of Challenging the United States over ISIS Will Present ISIS with Space to Grow Its Capabilities, Rest, and Refit," for more analysis on the impacts of Iranian activity in Deir ez Zor on the counter-ISIS mission.[4]

The deployment of air defense weapons to eastern Syria may also support Iranian objectives to achieve total hegemony in Deir ez Zor Province. Iran instructed the IRGC QF to achieve total hegemony in Deir ez Zor Province, Syria in May 2023.[5] Syrian state and local media reported the US-led International Coalition in partnership with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) arrested three people in a security operation on July 20 using helicopters in SDF-controlled territory, across the river from Deir ez Zor City.[6] Iranian-backed militias surged forces into Deir ez Zor Province between July 7 and 17 following rumored US-led International Coalition offensives into Syrian regime-controlled territory in late June, as CTP previously reported.[7]

Iran expanded judicial cooperation with Syria, likely as part of a policy of building institutional links with regional allies. Iranian Justice Minister Amin Hossein Rahimi and his Syrian counterpart Ahmed al Sayyid signed a memorandum of understanding on judicial cooperation and discussed forming a joint legal committee in Damascus on July 20.[8] Rahimi's visit is the first by an Iranian Minister of Justice since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war. Rahimi expressed that Iran aims to create a defense line against sanctions and address international law violations with judicial cooperation.[9] Iran and Iraq implemented a similar judicial cooperation agreement in 2021, demonstrating Iran's vision of implementing institutional, not just military and economic, links with countries in its Axis of Resistance.[10] This is part of a broader trend of Iran growing ties with Syria. Iran and Syria agreed to cooperation in 15 fields outside of the judiciary during Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi's visit to Syria in May.[11] Efforts to institutionalize ties in governance, trade, culture and transportation builds long-term alignment between Iran and its few regional allies.

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.

CIA Director William Burns stated on July 20 that Russian technicians are assisting with the Iranian Space Launch Vehicle (SLV) and missile program inside Iran. Russian assistance could advance Iran's development of inter-continental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and a military space program that would enhance Iran's intelligence gathering capabilities. Iran is developing its SLVs with lift capacity and boosters that could be capable of reaching ICBM ranges, potentially reaching the United States, if they were reconfigured, according to the DIA.[12] Advancing Iran's space program would contribute to its development of ICBMs because SLVs use similar technologies.[13] Iran can use SLVs to launch satellites capable of collecting imagery and maintain an updated target bank for attacks abroad.[14] Iranian state media has reported that the IRGC used launched satellites to collect intelligence on US military positions in the region.[15] The IRGC Aerospace Force Space Command launched its first Iranian military satellite in April 2020 and a second in March 2022.[16] Russia, furthermore, launched a Kanopus-V satellite—alternatively referred to as the “Khayyam” in Iran—into orbit on behalf of Iran in August 2022.[17]

Russia's assistance to Iran's SLV program highlights another form of Russian payment for Iranian support in the Ukraine war and the expansion of Russian-Iranian relations.[18] Iranian Deputy Minister of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics Brigadier General Hojatollah Qureishi separately discussed unspecified military cooperation with his Russian counterpart Alexander Fomin on July 21 in Moscow.[19] Iran's Ambassador to Russia Kazem Jalali also stated that Iran and Russia are cooperating on civilian passenger plane development.[20] Russian assistance with Iranian civil aviation could reinforce its proxies in Syria.[21] Iranian civil aviation has been in a state of decay for decades due to international sanctions.[22]

The above developments in Russo-Iranian cooperation follow reports that Iran is no longer expecting Russian delivery of Su-35 fighter jets.[23] Western media previously speculated that Iran could receive Russian military equipment, including Su-35 fighter jets, in return for supplying Russia with drones in the Ukraine war.[24]

BRICS has invited Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi to attend its 15th summit in Johannesburg, South Africa in late August.[25] BRICS is an economic and political organization composed of Brazil, China, India, Russia, and South Africa.[26] Raisi emphasized Iran's readiness to connect BRICS countries to global energy and economic markets during a speech at the 14th BRICS summit in June 2022.[27] Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian separately emphasized that Iran will be a “reliable” partner if it joins BRICS during a meeting with BRICS foreign ministers in Cape Town, South Africa on June 2.[28] This invitation comes amid the Raisi administration's increased emphasis on using multilateral organizations to advance Iran's political and economic goals, such as undermining Western sanctions. Iran became a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization on July 4.[29]

The Iranian regime has detained a US national.[30] UK-based *Middle East Eye* reported on July 21 that Iranian authorities detained the individual in 2022, citing one inside source.[31] US-based *Semafor* news outlet separately stated on July 21 that it did not disclose the identity of the detainee to avoid jeopardizing negotiations over their release. *Semafor* added that the United States and Iran have held prisoner swap negotiations in recent weeks and agreed that “the [most recently detained] American will be part of any deal and there are no delays being cause by [the person’s] inclusion.”[32] The Iranian regime is also detaining other American citizens such as Siamak Namazi, Emad Sharghi, and Morad Tahbaz.[33] The United States and Iran conducted prisoner exchanges in 2015 following the implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. There is no evidence that suggests current prisoner exchange discussions encompass a nuclear agreement. [34]

Iran Update, July 24, 2023

Iran Update, July 24, 2023

Amin Soltani, Annika Ganzeveld, and Ashka Jhaveri

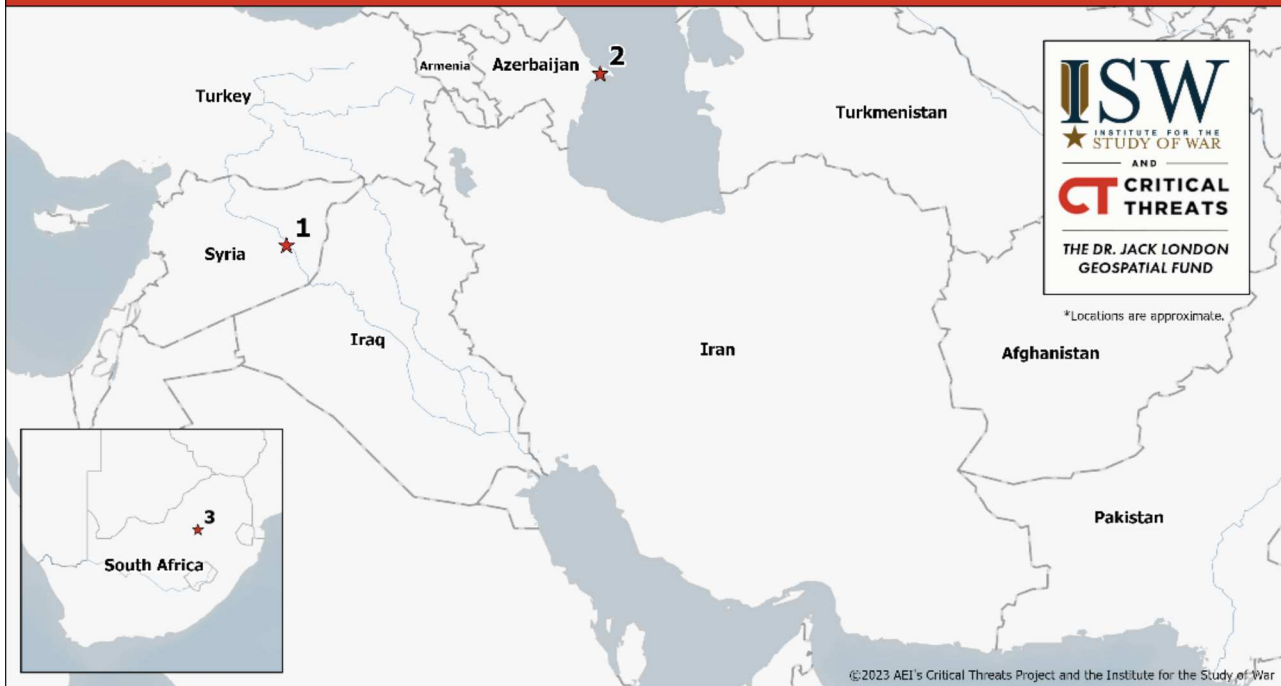
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Key Takeaways

1. The buildup of Iranian-backed forces in eastern Syria is possibly causing local anti-Iran and anti-Shia discontent.
2. The Iranian state-run Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) launched an Azeri language section on July 21, likely to shape domestic Azerbaijani public opinion as Iran grapples with its concerns about the Caucasus becoming an arena for foreign interference.
3. Supreme National Security Council Secretary Rear Admiral Ali Akbar Ahmadian called for greater cyber security cooperation among BRICS countries during a Friends of BRICS National Security Advisors meeting in Johannesburg, South Africa on July 24. Iran may seek to bolster cyber security cooperation with BRICS countries to confront cyber-attacks and negative Western media narratives about Iran more effectively.

Iran Update | July 24, 2023



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- 2). BAKU - The Iranian state-run Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) launched an Azeri language section on July 21, likely to shape domestic Azerbaijani public opinion as Iran grapples with its concerns about the Caucasus becoming an arena for foreign interference.
- 3). JOHANNESBURG - Supreme National Security Council Secretary Rear Admiral Ali Akbar Ahmadian called for greater cyber security cooperation among BRICS countries during a Friends of BRICS National Security Advisors meeting in Johannesburg, South Africa on July 24. Iran may seek to bolster cyber security cooperation with BRICS countries to confront cyber-attacks and negative Western media narratives about Iran more effectively.

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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 buildup of Iranian-backed forces in eastern Syria is possibly causing local anti-Iran and anti-Shia discontent. Iran surged forces into eastern Syria and increased militant salaries in July following rumored International Coalition attacks into Syrian regime-controlled territory, as CTP previously reported.[1] Local armed actors clashed with Iranian-backed militias several times since then, such as by attacking a military vehicle and engaging in a gunfight.[2] Civilians attacked a bus carrying Shiite pilgrims in Albu Kamal on July 14.[3] Kata'ib Hezbollah militants searched for the people who attacked the bus and threatened locals over the incident.[4] Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force commanders held a meeting in Deir ez Zor City on July 24 to discuss repeated attacks on Iranian-backed militias and Shiite pilgrims.[5] Local anti-Syrian regime media *Eye of Euphrates* reported that the Iranians are afraid the situation in Deir ez Zor will get out of control following the attacks.[6] Convoys of pilgrims and Iranian-backed militias disguised as pilgrims have entered Syria from the Albu Kamal border crossing without such incidents.[7] That the attacks have occurred after the surge of Iranian-backed forces to eastern Syria suggests local dissatisfaction with the foreign fighters in eastern Syria.

Iranian Domestic and Political Affairs

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The Iranian state-run Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) launched an Azeri language section on July 21, likely to shape domestic Azerbaijani public opinion as Iran grapples with its concerns about the Caucasus becoming an arena for foreign interference.[8] IRNA Chief Executive Ali Naderi met with his counterparts at the Azerbaijan State News Agency in Baku on July 21 to facilitate further cooperation between the two news agencies and launch IRNA's Azeri section.[9] Iranian Ambassador to Azerbaijan Abbas Mousavi stated Iran's hope that this move would improve relations between the two countries.[10] Iran has previously attempted to influence in Azerbaijan's domestic affairs, including but not limited to sponsoring Shia militant groups inside Azerbaijan.[11] President Ebrahim Raisi and Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian separately met with the Armenian Foreign Affairs Minister Ararat Mirzoyan in Tehran on July 24. [12] Raisi stated that foreign interference in the region complicates issues in the Caucasus, emphasizing that Iran will not accept any geopolitical changes in the region.[13] Mirzoyan responded that Armenia will "never become a platform for anti-Iranian actions."

The launching of IRNA Azeri and Raisi's emphasis on preventing foreign interference in the region is consistent with recent regime rhetoric and action with respect to its security concerns in Azerbaijan and the wider Caucasus region. Supreme Leader Military Affairs Advisor and former IRGC Commander Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi expressed concern on July 12 about Western attempts to sow discord in the Caucasus by making geopolitical changes in the region. [14] Supreme Leader Foreign Policy Advisor Ali Akbar Velayati similarly warned Russia on July 13 about possible NATO interference and aggression in the Caucasus.[15] Israel-based *i24News* claimed on July 16 that Armenia has used Iranian Shahed drones in several recent clashes with Azerbaijan, which if true would signal that Tehran is prepared to arm Azerbaijan's adversaries if the former does not accede to Iran's demands.[16] The IRGC Ground Forces conducted a military exercise near Iran's border with Azerbaijan on July 19.[17] Armed Forces General Staff Chief Major General Mohammad Bagheri stated on the sidelines of the exercise that Iran's armed forces are prepared to take "powerful" actions if Azerbaijan does not address Iran's security concerns.[18]

Iranian officials have articulated a series of demands against Azerbaijan, which largely focus on Baku halting its anti-Iran cooperation with Israel and Turkey. Regime officials have frequently accused Baku of allowing Israel to use Azerbaijani territory to launch operations against Iran. [19] The regime additionally opposes Azerbaijan and Turkey's efforts to establish a corridor between Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic in Armenia. Such a corridor would directly connect Azerbaijan to eastern Turkey and hamper Iranian economic access to European and Russian markets.[20] Turkey and Azerbaijan have also stalled Iranian efforts to feed its gas into the existing pipelines built by the Azerbaijanis that travel through Turkish territory before arriving in Europe via the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC).[21] Iranian officials and media previously accused Israel of using Azerbaijan as an intelligence base to instigate protests during the Mahsa Amini movement.[22]

Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Secretary Rear Admiral Ali Akbar Ahmadian called for greater cyber security cooperation among BRICS countries during a Friends of BRICS National Security Advisors meeting in Johannesburg, South Africa on July 24. [23] **Iran may seek to bolster cyber security cooperation with BRICS countries to confront cyber-attacks and negative Western media narratives about Iran more effectively.** Iran is not currently a member of BRICS, an economic and political organization composed of Brazil, China, India, Russia, and South Africa.[24] Iranian officials have repeatedly expressed their desire to join this multilateral organization, however.[25] Ahmadian's comments about cyber security cooperation point to the kinds of benefits Iran seeks to acquire as a full member of BRICS. Ahmadian lamented that Iranian infrastructure has been the "victim" of numerous cyber-attacks. [26] Israel has conducted multiple cyber-attacks against Iran in recent years, including against Iranian nuclear facilities.[27] Ahmadian additionally accused the United States of using digital platforms to encourage Iranian citizens to take "actions against Iran's national security." Iranian officials accused Western media of stoking the Mahsa Amini protest movement between September 2022 and January 2023 as part of the West's "soft war" against the regime.[28] "Soft war" is an Iranian doctrinal term that refers to the enemy use of nonmilitary means, such as economic and

psychological pressure and information operations, to erode regime legitimacy, cultivate domestic opposition, and propagate Western values in Iran.[29]

Iran seeks to join the BRICS as part of its efforts to create a parallel world order with other revisionist states to confront Western “dominance.”[30] Ahmadian called on BRICS countries to use “non-American internet systems and platforms for financial, economic, and administrative exchanges.”[31] Iran has sought an alternative financial messaging platform to Belgium-based SWIFT ever since SWIFT disconnected Iran from its platform in 2018.[32] Regime-affiliated news outlets have additionally expressed support for linking Iran’s SEPAM financial messaging system with China, India, and Russia’s financial messaging systems in recent months.[33] Iran seeks to conduct economic exchanges in local currencies to preserve its dwindling foreign currency reserves.[34] President Ebrahim Raisi recently called on Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) members to abandon the US dollar in financial transactions during his speech at the 23rd SCO Summit on July 4.[35]

Iran Update, July 25, 2023

Iran Update, July 25, 2023

Amin Soltani, Annika Ganzeveld, Kitaneh Fitzpatrick, and Christina Harward

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Key Takeaways

1. Iranian media and officials highlighted the addition of the Abu Mahdi land attack cruise missile to Iran's naval arsenal to signal Iran's longer-range naval capabilities.
2. Supreme National Security Council Secretary Rear Admiral Ali Akbar Ahmadian called on BRICS to include Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela in this organization as part of its effort to establish a parallel international order that challenges Western "dominance."
3. Iranian students are planning protests in early September in commemoration of Mahsa Amini's killing on September 18, 2022. Iranian leadership has voiced concerns about the resumption of anti-regime protests in recent weeks.

Iran Update | July 25, 2023



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Iranian media and officials highlighted the addition of the Abu Mahdi land attack cruise missile (LACM) to Iran's naval arsenal to signal Iran's longer-range naval capabilities.

IRGC-affiliated *Tasnim News Agency* reported that the Abu Mahdi LACM has reached mass production after three years and has been added to the IRGC and Artesh naval arsenals.[1] IRGC Navy Commander Rear Admiral Ali Reza Tangsiri stated that the addition of the Abu Mahdi LACM will "render enemy aircraft carriers ineffective" and keep the enemy away from Iran's shores due to its long range.[2] Iran uses its LACM arsenal as an integral part of its anti-access/area denial strategy to prevent adversaries from entering or operating in essential areas.[3] LACMs provide a precision-strike capability that could complicate missile defenses, according to the Defense Intelligence Agency.[4] Iranian media and officials have stated that the Abu Mahdi has a range of up to 1,000 kilometers and can be mounted on a vessel or fired from coastal platforms.[5] Officials have further emphasized that the Abu Mahdi will allow Iran to attack targets from multiple directions deep within Iranian territory and is difficult to detect as it has a low-flight ceiling. CTP cannot verify whether the Abu Mahdi has the capabilities that Iran claims it does.

Iran announced the production and delivery of the Abu Mahdi LACM to the IRGC and Artesh navies as the United States strengthens its naval presence in the region. Iran seized three international vessels in the Strait of Hormuz between April 27 and May 12, after which the US Department of Defense announced that it would bolster the Fifth Fleet's defensive posture in the Persian Gulf.[6] The IRGC Navy then conducted unprofessional and unsafe maneuvers near a US naval ship in the Persian Gulf on May 19.[7] The Artesh Navy attempted to seize two commercial tankers in the Strait of Hormuz on July 5 and the IRGC Navy seized another in the Persian Gulf on July 6.[8] The United States similarly deployed several F-16 and F-35 fighter jets

and the guided-missile destroyer *USS Thomas Hudner* to the Persian Gulf between July 14 and 17 to deter further Iranian tanker seizures.[9] IRGC Navy Commander Rear Admiral Ali Reza Tangsiri threatened that Iran will hold the United States and US companies responsible for confiscating and unloading Iranian oil.[10]

Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Secretary Rear Admiral Ali Akbar Ahmadian called on BRICS to include Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela in this organization as part of its effort to establish a parallel international order that challenges Western “dominance.”[11] Ahmadian stated that Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela’s accession into BRICS would increase this organization’s share of world energy reserves during a Friends of BRICS National Security Advisors meeting in Johannesburg, South Africa on July 24. BRICS is an economic and political organization composed of Brazil, China, India, Russia, and South Africa.[12] Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela’s inclusion in BRICS would integrate major energy exporters and importers. Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela are major energy exporters, while China and India are among the world’s largest energy importers.[13] China is additionally the largest importer of Iranian oil. [14] Ahmadian’s call for Saudi Arabia and Venezuela to be included in BRICS is consistent with previous Iranian efforts to incorporate these countries into Iran’s parallel world order. Iranian officials and media framed the March 10 Iran-Saudi Arabia rapprochement as “a big failure” for Israel and the United States.[15] Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi separately stressed Iran and Venezuela’s common struggle against “imperialism and domination” during his trip to Latin America between June 12-16.[16]

Iranian students are planning protests in early September in commemoration of Mahsa Amini’s killing on September 18, 2022. *The Guardian* interviewed an Iranian student in a July 24 article who claimed that some Iranian students have planned “huge protests” in the weeks leading up to September 18. The student added that “whether or not the regime wants to accept it, we will hit the streets again and there’s no going back (...) There will be more arrests or worse. These are scare tactics and we won’t fall for this.”[17] CTP previously observed that demonstrations commemorating the death of killed protesters frequently generated higher turnout rates than non-commemoration protests throughout the Mahsa Amini movement.[18] The protest marking 40 days since the killing of Mahsa Amini in Saghez, Kurdistan Province included participation from roughly 10,000 demonstrators, for example, the largest turnout CTP observed throughout the movement.[19]

Iranian leadership has voiced concerns about the resumption of anti-regime protests in recent weeks. IRGC Commander Major General Hossein Salami warned on July 13 that the IRGC would take “decisive action” against individuals who threaten Iranian national security and stated that Iran was enduring “its most sensitive time ever,” suggesting that he does not believe the regime has eradicated the risk of anti-regime activity resuming.[20] Several other senior Iranian officials, including IRGC Deputy Commander Rear Admiral Ali Fadavi, warned of Iran’s enemies’ plans to destabilize the regime in recent weeks.[21] Iranian authorities have separately taken steps to purge Iranian universities of professors who hold anti-regime views in recent weeks.[22] Universities became a major site of unrest throughout the Mahsa Amini movement as students largely spearheaded the movement.[23]

NOTE: Portions of the following text appeared in the Institute for the Study of War’s July 25, 2023 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

US intelligence officials warned on July 25 that Russia’s drone supply will dramatically increase as a result of continued bilateral Russo-Iranian cooperation. Analysts from the US Defense Intelligence Agency told reporters that after the completion of the Shahed drone manufacturing facility in the Republic of Tatarstan, Russia will likely have a stockpile of drones “orders of magnitude larger” than what Russia has been able to procure from Iran to date.[24]

CTP has observed numerous ways in which Russia could compensate Iran for its military support for the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Western media speculated in late 2022 that Iran might receive Russian Su-35 fighter jets in return for supplying Russia with drones.[25] Iranian military officials have increasingly expressed skepticism at receiving Su-35s in recent months, however.[26] Western

media reported in March that Russia provided Iran with advanced surveillance software and cyber weapons in exchange for drones.[27] A high-ranking Israeli military official separately expressed concern in June that Russia is providing Iran with Western weapons captured in Ukraine.[28] The British Secret Intelligence Service additionally revealed in July that Iran seeks to acquire cash from Russia in return for Iranian drones.[29]

Iran Update, July 26, 2023

Iran Update, July 26, 2023

Amin Soltani, Annika Ganzeveld, and Andie Parry

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Key Takeaways

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

Iran Update | July 26, 2023



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2. TEHRAN - Bolivian Defense Minister Edmundo Novillo Aguilar expressed interest in purchasing Iranian drones on July 25.
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4. JOHANNESBURG - Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Secretary Rear Admiral Ali Akbar Ahmadian met with newly-appointed Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on the sidelines of a Friends of BRICS National Security Advisors meeting in Johannesburg, South Africa on July 24.

Iranian Activities in the Levant

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.

An Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force (IRGC QF) commander, Iranian security officials, and Hamas leadership discussed capitalizing on Israeli unrest in a three-hour meeting in mid-July, according to an Iranian diplomat and a Hamas source who spoke with Reuters.[1] The leaders decided to refrain from “direct interference” in Israel’s social unrest. Axis of Resistance leadership and media have devoted considerable attention to the judicial reform protests in Israel. IRGC-affiliated *Tasnim News Agency* recirculated former Israeli officials' comments on a coming civil war and the disintegration of Israeli society in the past week. [2] Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) leader Hassan Nasrallah claimed Israel was on a path of collapse and fragmentation on July 24, referring to Israeli judicial reform.[3]

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

- **Iran may give priority to rebuilding capabilities in the West Bank.** CTP previously assessed Iran would likely help Palestinian militants rebuild the military capabilities the Israel Defense Forces degraded during a July 2023 raid in Jenin.[4] Iranian leaders have stressed the importance of cultivating an armed resistance in the West Bank.[5]
- **Iran may build up weapon stockpiles in Syria.** Iran may have used Israeli preoccupation with domestic and Palestine issues to move advanced weaponry through eastern Syria and avoid Israeli targeting in May 2023.[6] Israel targeted weapons sites in

Damascus in an airstrike on July 18 amid domestic unrest, however.[7] Israel has long sought to prevent the Iranian transfer of personnel and weapons into Syria.

- **Iran may not take provocative actions.** Iranian leadership may calculate ongoing Israeli unrest will be more disruptive for Israel than any direct Iranian action. LH-affiliated media *Al Manar* has repeatedly published that political and military divisions in Israel benefit Axis of Resistance objectives.[8]

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.

Bolivian Defense Minister Edmundo Novillo Aguilar expressed interest in purchasing Iranian drones on July 25.[9] CTP previously assessed that Iran may seek to sell drones to Bolivia as part of a memorandum of understanding (MoU) that the two signed on July 20.[10] Novillo stated on July 25 that Iranian drones would help Bolivia monitor mountainous areas and secure its borders against drug traffickers.[11] Ashtiani stated on July 19 that Iran's defense industry can provide Bolivia with "advanced technology" and separately stated on July 20 that Iran can help Bolivia with "border control" and "confronting drug smuggling." [12] Drones are frequently used to bolster border security and combat smuggling.

The MOU is consistent with Iran's explicitly stated policy in recent years to increase the number of countries that buy Iranian drones. Supreme Leader Military Affairs Advisor and former IRGC Commander Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi boasted in October 2022 that 22 countries—including Algeria, Armenia, Serbia, Tajikistan, and Venezuela—had submitted formal requests for Iranian drones.[13] President Ebrahim Raisi additionally promoted Iranian drone technology during several recent foreign trips, including during his most recent trip to Kenya, Uganda, and Zimbabwe between July 12-14.[14] Iranian media and officials have previously highlighted the desire of other African countries, including Ethiopia, to purchase Iranian-made drones.[15] Iran has, furthermore, established drone manufacturing factories in Tajikistan and Venezuela and is building another in Yelabuga, Russia.[16]

The MOU is also consistent with CTP's previous assessment that Iran is seeking to increase defense exports to generate revenue for the Iranian economy.[17] Armed Forces General Staff Chief Major General Mohammad Bagheri emphasized on May 31 that Iran will export its military capabilities to "friendly" countries.[18] Bagheri also called on Foreign Affairs Ministry officials to relay Iran's willingness to export its defense capabilities to foreign dignitaries on May 30. [19] 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.[20] Iran is currently facing critical economic conditions, with the value of the rial hovering slightly below 500,000 rials to one US dollar.[21] Iranian media, citing the Iran Statistical Center, reported on July 25 that Iran's inflation rate is approximately 47.5 percent.[22]

The Raisi administration seeks to bolster electricity cooperation with Russia. Iranian Energy Minister Ali Akbar Mehrabian announced on July 16 that Iran is in "final negotiations" to conduct electricity exchanges with Russia via two routes, one via Azerbaijan and the other via Armenia and Georgia.[23] Iranian officials have discussed connecting Iran's electricity grid to Russia's for several years, making it unclear whether Mehrabian's announcement indicates real progress on this project.[24] Unspecified senior Iranian Energy Ministry officials separately discussed bilateral electricity cooperation with managers of Russian power company Rosseti in Tehran on July 26. [25] Iran currently exchanges electricity with Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Iraq, Pakistan, Turkey, and Turkmenistan.[26]

Connecting Iran's electricity grid to Russia's could increase domestic stability in Iran. Mehrabian stated that Iranians use more electricity in the summer while Russians use more electricity in the winter and that therefore Iran can export electricity to Russia in the winter and import electricity from Russia in the summer.[27] Power outages during a heatwave previously

triggered protests throughout Iran in June 2021.[28] Several Iranian cities have experienced temperatures greater than 115 degrees Fahrenheit in recent weeks.[29] Iranian authorities have additionally shut down numerous offices across Iran for consuming “too much” electricity in recent weeks.[30]

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

[31] Ahmadian and Wang Yi discussed Chinese transportation investments and China’s support for Iranian territorial integrity. This meeting is part of Iran’s broader efforts to establish a parallel world order with other revisionist states that challenges Western “dominance.”[32] Iran recently became a member of the Chinese and Russian-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) on July 4.[33] Iranian media framed Iran’s accession into the organization as part of “the transformation of the world order.”[34] CTP previously assessed that Iran’s membership in this organization may enable it to circumvent sanctions by conducting non-US dollar financial transactions with other SCO countries.[35] Iranian officials have additionally expressed support for Chinese regional infrastructure projects and sought to attract Chinese infrastructure investments in recent weeks.[36]

Iran Update, July 27, 2023

Iran Update, July 27, 2023

Ashka Jhaveri, Annika Ganzeveld, and Johanna Moore

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

Iran Update | July 27, 2023



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

Iranian Activities in the Levant

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

Iran-backed militias withdrew from unspecified positions in Deir ez Zor Province and redeployed to the Syrian desert near the Iraq-Syria border, possibly as part of a coercive campaign to expel the United States from Syria. Iranian-backed militias deployed to lines of control with the SDF between July 7 and 20.[1] The militias moved to the positions notionally because Russian forces expressed concerns that the United States would conduct an attack in Deir ez Zor Province.[2] UK-based anti-Syrian regime media *The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights* reported Iranian-backed militias reduced their forces "significantly and suddenly" on July 26 to prevent a US offensive, despite there being no indications that the SDF or US are planning an incursion into regime-controlled territory.[3] The redeployment is part of a trend that CTP has observed since early July, however, in which Iranian-backed forces have deployed to the central Syrian desert. The IRGC QF ordered dozens of military vehicles of the Iranian-affiliated Syrian Arab Army 47th Regiment and Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) to deploy on July 11 to military points approximately 35 kilometers from the 55-kilometer exclusion zone around the Al Tanf Garrison.[4] The PMF also deployed to unspecified positions in the desert near Albu Kamal on July 26.[5] Iranian leaders have signaled preparation to resume its campaign to expel US forces from the Middle East by attacking and killing US service members.[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.

Ashab al Kahf claimed an improvised explosive device (IED) attack on a US logistics convoy in Diwaniyah on July 26, indicating the group has started an IED campaign to expel the United States from Iraq.[7] AK claimed a separate IED attack on a US logistics convoy in Hilla, Babil Province on July 24.[8] Iranian-backed Iraqi proxies' last IED attack on a US logistics convoy in Iraq took place in January 2023.[9] These US logistics convoys are commonly operated by Iraqi contractors, not US servicemembers.[10] Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba Secretary General Akram Kaabi released a "final warning" to US forces on July 26 prior to the IED attack the same day.[11] Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba has close ties to Ashab al Kahf in coordinating previous attack campaigns and promoting Ashab al Kahf activity on Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba channels.[12] CTP cannot currently determine if this a coordinated effort between Ashab al Kahf and Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba.

Iranian Domestic and Political Affairs

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

Iran is simultaneously lobbying China and Russia for assistance in developing Iranian infrastructure projects. Iranian Ambassador to Russia Kazem Jalali called for "accelerating" the construction of the Rasht-Astara railway during a meeting with Russian State Duma International Affairs Committee Chairman Leonid Slutsky in Moscow, Russia on July 27.[13] The Rasht-Astara railway is part of the International North South Transit Corridor (INSTC), a transit route which, once completed, will connect Russia and Central Asia to the Persian Gulf via Iran.[14] Iran attaches importance to developing the INSTC to bolster Iran's economy and become a regional "transit hub." [15] Russia agreed to partially finance Iranian construction of the Rasht-Astara railway on May 17.[16] Ardabil Province officials separately presented 21 investment opportunities, including infrastructure projects, to Qinghai Province, China officials at the China-Iran Economic and Commercial Development Conference in Tehran on July 27.[17] Ardabil Province Governor Hamid Ameli previously called on Chinese railway companies to investment in Iran's plan to connect the Ardabil railway to Russia and Central Asia in April.[18] An Iranian transportation official additionally called on China to invest in the construction of a Chinese-Iranian-Afghan railway corridor on July 13.[19]

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<https://twitter.com/baznewz/status/1679099135260082176>; <https://twitter.com/DeirEzzore/status/1678857520184537088>; [https://eyeofeuphrates\(dot\) com/ar/news/2023/07/08/9071](https://eyeofeuphrates(dot) com/ar/news/2023/07/08/9071); <https://eyeofeuphrates.com/ar/news/2023/07/20/9181>; <https://www.syriahr.com/en/303779/>; [https://eyeofeuphrates\(dot\) com/ar/news/2023/07/11/9094](https://eyeofeuphrates(dot) com/ar/news/2023/07/11/9094); https://twitter.com/Sharqya_reporte/status/1679226202693812224;
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Iran Update, July 28, 2023

Iran Update, July 28, 2023

Amin Soltani and Ashka Jhaveri

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Key Takeaways

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

Iran Update | July 28, 2023



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

2. TEHRAN - Regime officials are making preparations in anticipation of future protests commemorating Mahsa Amini's killing on September 18, 2022.

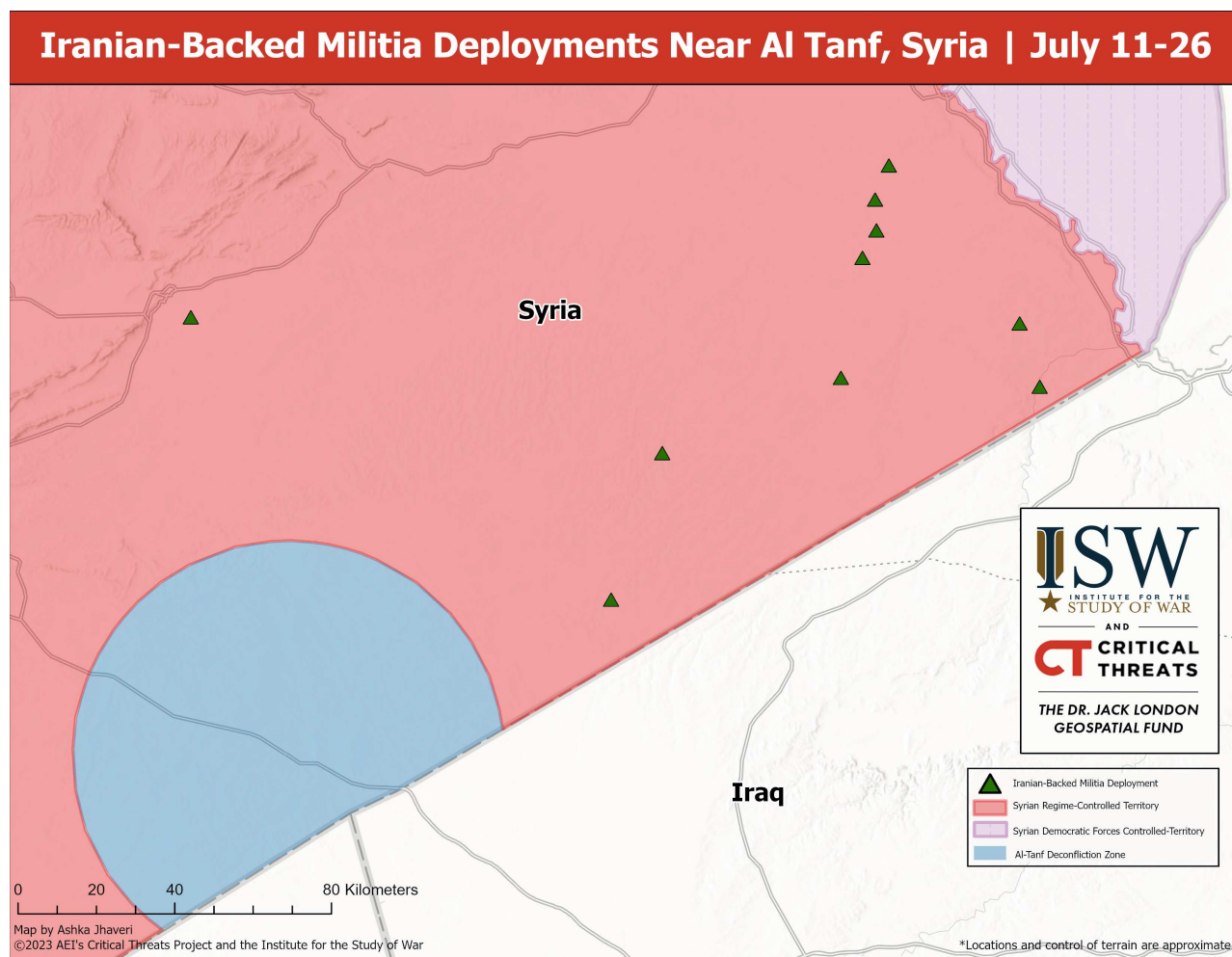
Iranian Activities in the Levant

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

Iranian-backed militias deployed to the Syrian desert near the Al Tanf Deconfliction Zone throughout July, possibly as part of a coercive campaign to expel the United States from Syria. Iranian-backed militias initially deployed to lines of control with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) between July 7 and July 20.[1] The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force (IRGC QF) also ordered militias to deploy to several points in the desert between July 11 and July 26. The Syrian Arab Army 47th Regiment and Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) deployed on July 11 to military points, including one approximately 35 kilometers from the 55-kilometer exclusion zone around the Al Tanf Garrison.[2] Militias deployed to the T-2 Pumping Station where Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) stores Iranian drones.[3] Fatemiyoun deployed to Talila Camp on July 16, south of Palmyra.[4] LH and Fatemiyoun simulated a battle using Iranian-made rockets, drones, and artillery at the Talila Camp on June 10.[5] Iranian-backed militias withdrew from positions on July 26 in Deir ez Zor and moved towards the desert ostensibly following concerns from Russia that the United States would conduct an attack in Deir ez Zor Province. There are no indications that the United States or SDF is planning an incursion into regime-controlled territory.

Iran, Russia, and the Syrian regime may be setting conditions to attack US forces at the Al Tanf Garrison. An unspecified US DoD official told Pentagon reporters that a Russian aircraft was collecting intelligence on the Al Tanf garrison during flyovers, most recently on July 14.[6] The official noted that Russian military activity stems from growing coordination between Moscow, Tehran, and the Syrian regime to pressure the United States to leave Syria. Russian forces also are conducting an information operation that falsely presents the United States as an imminent threat to

Syria. Russia forces, for example, organized a military exercise for the Syrian Arab Army from July 16 to July 18 that simulated a US chemical weapons attack and accused the United States of transporting chemical weapons into Al Tanf to prepare for false flag attacks.[7] The Russian framing of the United States as an aggressor and evidence of intelligence sharing with Iran suggests Russia and Iran are creating optimal conditions to attack. Iranian-backed militias have several military facilities in the desert surrounding the exclusion zone with capabilities to surveil and attack the Al Tanf Garrison.[8]



Iranian-backed militias withdrew from unspecified positions in Deir ez Zor Province and redeployed to the Syrian desert near the Iraq-Syria border on July 26.[9]

Iranian Domestic and Political Affairs

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

Regime officials are making preparations in anticipation of future protests commemorating Mahsa Amini's killing on September 18, 2022. The regime is preparing for potential future protests in two ways, namely imposing further control over universities and monitoring cyberspace. IRGC Commander Adviser and former IRGC Intelligence Organization head Hossein Taeb warned on July 20 that universities will be the source of future anti-regime activities. [10] IRGC Political Deputy Yadollah Javani similarly warned on July 21 that universities will be the source of future “disturbance” and that the IRGC will “securitize” universities in the near future.[11] IRGC Deputy Commander Rear Admiral Ali Fadavi met with university administrators and professors in Markazi Province on July 27 to emphasize the importance of universities in promoting Islamic and revolutionary values as enemies seek to undermine the authority of the Islamic revolution.[12] Iranian authorities have also targeted universities in recent weeks, purging

anti-regime university professors, limiting the activities of student organizations, and imposing penalties on students engaged in civic activities.[13] Universities became a major site of unrest throughout the Mahsa Amini movement and previous unrest which students largely spearheaded. [14] Iranian students are, furthermore, planning protests in early September in commemoration of Mahsa Amini's killing, as CTP previously reported.[15] The Supreme National Security Council has also approved measures as of July 27 for the Intelligence and Security Ministry to monitor cyberspace to establish "psychological security." [16] Regime officials have repeatedly accused protesters of causing "psychological insecurity." [17] Iranian leadership has, furthermore, voiced concerns about the resumption of anti-regime protests in recent weeks and threatened to take "decisive action" against individuals who threaten Iranian national security as Iran endures "its most sensitive time ever." [18]

The regime also uses internet disruptions, security service deployments, and mandatory veiling enforcement to crack down on protests. The regime repeatedly employed internet disruptions as a security measure during the 2022 Mahsa Amini protests and senior regime officials have often discussed implementing countrywide internet shutdowns in anticipation of further unrest even after the Mahsa Amini movement culminated.[19] The regime not only increased security service deployments throughout the 2022 protests but also did so in anticipation of unrest around the Chahar Shanbeh Souri and Nowrouz national holidays in March 2023.[20] The Iranian Law Enforcement Command (LEC) resumed the country-wide deployment of its morality patrol officers to enforce mandatory veiling on July 16.[21] The morality patrol enforces dress codes that adhere to the regime's standards and is the unit responsible for arresting and killing Mahsa Amini in September 2022.[22] The regime seeks to address noncompliance with the hijab law because it views violations as a threat to regime stability.[23]

[1] [https://eyeofeuphrates\(dot\)com/ar/news/2023/07/12/9105](https://eyeofeuphrates(dot)com/ar/news/2023/07/12/9105); <https://twitter.com/baznewz/status/1679099135260082176>; <https://twitter.com/baznewz/status/1679099135260082176>; [https://eyeofeuphrates\(dot\)com/ar/news/2023/07/08/9071](https://eyeofeuphrates(dot)com/ar/news/2023/07/08/9071); <https://eyeofeuphrates.com/ar/news/2023/07/20/9181>; <https://www.syriahr.com/en/303779/>; [https://eyeofeuphrates\(dot\)com/ar/news/2023/07/11/9094](https://eyeofeuphrates(dot)com/ar/news/2023/07/11/9094); https://twitter.com/Sharqya_reporte/status/1679226202693812224; <https://twitter.com/DeirEzzore/status/1677278853734051846>; <https://twitter.com/DeirEzzore/status/1677279431654531074>; <https://www....>; <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-july-20-2023-64b9d7...>

[2] [https://eyeofeuphrates\(dot\)com/index.php/ar/news/2023/07/11/9102](https://eyeofeuphrates(dot)com/index.php/ar/news/2023/07/11/9102)

[3] <https://twitter.com/thiqanewsagency/status/1540979640466116610>

[4] [https://qasioun-news\(dot\)com/ar/articles/264520](https://qasioun-news(dot)com/ar/articles/264520)

[5] [https://halabtodaytv\(dot\)net/archives/250806](https://halabtodaytv(dot)net/archives/250806); [https://qasioun-news\(dot\)com/ar/articles/263448](https://qasioun-news(dot)com/ar/articles/263448)

[6] <https://apnews.com/article/iran-russia-syria-military-fighter-jets-449a4...>

[7] https://t.me/SAM_Syria0/5139; <https://t.me/jharnous/989>; <https://t.me/jharnous/997>

[8] <https://twitter.com/thiqanewsagency/status/1618240228430614529>; <https://deirezzor24.net/%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%a8%d8%b4%d9%8a%d8%b1-%d9%8a%d8%a...>; <https://twitter.com/thiqanewsagency/status/1618240228430614529>; <https://www.syriahr.com/%d8%b9%d9%84%d9%89-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b1%d8%ba%d9%8...>; <https://twitter.com/GregoryPWaters/status/1627712761860956160?s=20>

[9] <https://www.syriahr.com/%D8%A8%D8%B4%D9%83%D9%84-%D9%85%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%A...>

[10] <https://t dot co/9fU6B2mlsm>

- [11] <https://t.co/IOkJeUbziu>
- [12] <https://defapress.ir/fa/news/606435>
- [13] <https://t.co/o9K8wpdErb> ; <https://www.iranintl.com/202307188779> ; <https://t.co/IOkJeUbziu>
- [14] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-may-23-2023>
- [15] <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/jul/24/theres-no-oth...> ; <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-july-25-2023>
- [16] <https://defapress.ir/fa/news/606375>
- [17] <https://www.farsnews.ir/news/14011216000971> ; <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-march-7-2023>
- [18] <https://www.farsnews.ir/khuzestan/news/14020422000586/>
- [19] <https://digiato.com/article/2023/01/04/internet-cutoff-exam-security> ; <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-january-4-2023> ; <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-january-18-2023> ; <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-march-15-2023> ; https://twitter.com/Entekhab_News/status/1635908849579196418?s=20 ; <https://twitter.com/Digiato/status/1635904737231925248?s=20>
- [20] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-march-7-2023> ; <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-march-8-2023> ; <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-march-9-2023> ; <https://www.entekhab.ir/fa/news/717882> ; <https://defapress.ir/fa/news/577222> ; <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1633080241810821121?s=20>
- [21] <https://time.com/6295238/iran-morality-police-return/>
- [22] <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-62984076>
- [23] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-july-17-2023>

Iran Update, July 31, 2023

Iran Update, July 31, 2023

Johanna Moore, Karolina Hird, 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 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.

Key Takeaways

1. Russian President Vladimir Putin stated that Russia is not seeking a confrontation with the United States in Syria but is prepared for “any scenario,” likely to deflect accountability in the event of an escalation between US and Russian forces in Syria. Putin’s comments suggests that Russian aggression in Syria will continue but does not indicate whether the activity will escalate further.
2. Iran hosted a delegation of senior Syrian officials in Tehran on July 31 as part of an effort to expand its economic and political relationships with Bashar al Assad’s regime.
3. Iran and Belarus are discussing deepening bilateral military cooperation over the backdrop of their mutual support for the Russian invasion of Ukraine. They may have discussed establishing Shahed kamikaze drone factories in Belarus to support the Russian invasion of Ukraine.
4. Iran has exported a record high of around one million barrels of oil per day (bpd) to China since January 2023, which reflects deepening the economic cooperation between the two countries.

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2. TEHRAN - Iran hosted a delegation of senior Syrian officials in Tehran on July 31 as part of an effort to expand its economic and political relationships with Bashar al Assad’s regime.
3. TEHRAN - Iran and Belarus are discussing deepening bilateral military cooperation over the backdrop of their mutual support for the Russian invasion of Ukraine. They may have discussed establishing Shahed kamikaze drone factories in Belarus to support the Russian invasion of Ukraine.
4. TEHRAN - Iran has exported a record high of around one million barrels of oil per day (bpd) to China since January 2023, which reflects deepening the economic cooperation between the two countries.

Iranian Activities in the Levant

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

Russian President Vladimir Putin stated that Russia is not seeking a confrontation with the United States in Syria but is prepared for “any scenario,” likely to deflect accountability in the event of an escalation between US and Russian forces in Syria.[1] CTP previously assessed that Russia, Syria, and Iran are coordinating military activity as part of a coercive campaign to expel the US from Syria.[2] Russian officials have repeated false claims that US aircraft have violated Russian airspace in Syria in conjunction with an increase in Russia’s violations of US airspace and aggressive maneuvers endangering US aircraft in Syria. Russian Deputy Head of the Reconciliation Center for Warring Parties in Syria Oleg Gurinov claimed on July 29 that US aircraft have dangerously approached Russian aircraft in Syria 23 times since January 2023.[3] He also claimed that US aircraft have locked weapons systems on Russian aircraft 11 of those 23 times, causing Russian jets to deploy flares. Putin’s comments suggests that Russian aggression in Syria will continue but does not indicate whether the activity will escalate further.

Iran hosted a delegation of senior Syrian officials in Tehran on July 31 as part of an effort to expand its economic and political relationships with Bashar al Assad’s regime. The delegation included Foreign Affairs Minister Faisal Mekdad and Economy and Foreign Trade Minister Mohammad Samer al Khalil.[4] Iranian officials met with Mekdad and Samer al Khalil to follow up on Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi’s visit to Damascus in May 2023, during which he signed 15 cooperative agreements on energy, trade, and transportation ties.[5] Raisi’s visit was the first trip an Iranian president had made to Syria since the start of the civil war in 2011.

Iranian leaders seek to achieve several effects in expanding economic and political cooperation with the Assad regime.

- Expanding economic interaction and trade with the Assad regime will help Iranian leaders revitalize their own economy, especially if Arab states send investment and reconstruction funds to Syria. An influx of cash and financial resources into Syria will create opportunities for Iran to circumvent sanctions and leech funds from the Syrian economy. Such circumstances would also empower Iran to send more funds to its proxy and partner militias throughout Syria, further reinforcing its military presence.
- The regime seeks to secure an unbroken rail line from Iran, through Iraq, to Syria and Lebanon to facilitate trade with and additional material support to the Assad regime, Lebanese Hezbollah, and Palestinian militias. Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian stated that the parties addressed removing obstacles to this transportation link during the visit.[6]
- The Raisi administration used the Syrian delegation's visit to present a unified front against the presence of US and Turkish forces in Syria. Abdollahian and Mekdad condemned the presence of these forces in a joint conference on July 31.[7] CTP has closely followed coordinated efforts between Iran, Russia, and Assad to pressure the US to leave Syria since June 2023.[8]

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 and Belarus are discussing deepening bilateral military cooperation over the backdrop of their mutual support for the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Iranian Defense Minister Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Gharaei Ashtiani hosted and signed a military cooperation agreement with his Belarusian counterpart, Lieutenant General Viktor Khrenin, in Tehran on July 31.[9] They may have discussed establishing Shahed kamikaze drone factories in Belarus to support the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Ukraine claimed that Iranian engineers traveled to Belarus in May 2023 to modify local factories to produce these drones for Russia.[10]

Iran exported a record high of around one million barrels of oil per day (bpd) to China since January 2023, which reflects deepening economic cooperation between the two countries. [11] Iranian oil exports to China have steadily risen since 2020, when Iran was selling around 325,000 bpd. These growing sales are part of the larger Iranian effort to strengthen strategic partnerships with other revisionist states, such as China and Russia, which CTP continues to assess and cover extensively in these updates. Iranian leaders seek such cooperation with these states to push back against US global influence and build a multipolar world order. Iran joining the Chinese-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization on July 4 is similarly part of this effort.[12]

Iran could derive several benefits from increasing energy sales to China.

- Iranian leaders will likely use the increasing oil exports to help buoy their deteriorating economy and circumvent US sanctions. The Iranian regime relies heavily on energy sales to generate revenue and finance its annual budget. US sanctions have dramatically limited such sales since 2019, however.[13]
- Iranian leaders may obtain Chinese support in developing domestic infrastructure in exchange for some oil sales. An Iranian transportation official announced on July 8 that Iran is conducting preliminary negotiations involving China constructing roads connecting Tehran to the Caspian Sea in exchange for Iranian oil.[14] Developing this infrastructure would support the larger Iranian effort of developing the country into a regional and international transportation corridor.

[1] <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-753036>

- [2] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-july-20-2023-64b9d7...>
- [3] <https://tass dot ru/armiya-i-opk/18403741>
- [4] www.irna dot ir/news/85186070
- [5] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-updates-may-3-2023>
- [6] www.irna dot ir/news/85186070
- [7] www.irna dot ir/news/85186070
- [8] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-july-28-2023>
- [9] <http://www.defapress dot ir/fa/news/607168>
- [10] <https://www.jpost dot com/breaking-news/article-742605>
- [11] <https://www.tehrantimes dot com/news/487358>
- [12] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-july-5-2023>
- [13] <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/24/us/politics/iran-sanctions.html>
- [14] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-july-7-2023>