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Iran Update, May 1, 2023

Iran Update, May 1, 2023

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May 1, 2023, 5:00 pm ET

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Iranian leadership dismissed several economic officials and emphasized fighting corruption between April 27 and May 1 to improve Iran's economy, which is very unlikely to precipitate the meaningful economic change necessary to curb inflation and stabilize the Iranian rial. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei called on parliament and the Raisi administration to fight economic corruption during a meeting with workers, labor organization members, and Raisi administration officials on April 29.[1] President Ebrahim Raisi has engaged in numerous symbolic economic engagements in recent days. Raisi dismissed 15 unspecified managers in Khuzestan Province to demonstrate his administration's "intolerance" of corruption during a two-day trip to this province on April 27-28.[2] Raisi additionally ordered the formation of a working group on April 30 to "follow up on the issues" raised by Khamenei in his April 29 meeting with workers without providing further details.[3] Raisi called on his administration to address the needs of contract workers and retirees—who have organized widespread strikes and protests in recent weeks—during a MAPNA Company event for International Workers' Day on May 1.[4]

Parliament separately impeached Industry, Mines, and Trade Minister Reza Fatemi Amin on April 30.[5] Several parliamentarians accused Amin of mismanaging the automobile industry and of involvement in a corruption scandal.[6] Parliament previously attempted but failed to impeach Amin in November 2022.[7] President Ebrahim Raisi appointed Mehdi Niazi—who previously served as Industry, Mines, and Trade Deputy Minister—to replace Amin.[8] Amin's impeachment follows the dismissal of numerous Raisi administration economic officials—including Program and Budgeting Organization Chief Massoud Mir Kazemi, Agricultural Jihad Minister Javad Sadati Nejad, state-affiliated Innovation and Prosperity Fund President Ali Vahdat, and Central Bank of Iran Chief Ali Salehabadi—in recent months.[9] Reformist politicians suggested that Fatemi Amin's impeachment would not improve Iran's deteriorating economic conditions without meaningful changes to Iran's economic ecosystem.[10] Former Rouhani administration Spokesperson Ali Rabie wrote an op-ed in reformist-aligned *Etemad Online* stressing that Iran must address economic corruption through structural reforms and programs on April 30. Parliamentarian Jalil Rahimi Jahan Abadi similarly stated that fundamental issues with Iran's economic policies had created "victims" of presidential administrations. Former Industry, Mines, and Trade Minister under then-President Ali Khamenei and reformist politician Mostafa Hashemi Taba separately criticized parliament and the Raisi administration of tackling "superficial" problem sets instead of furthering Iran's strategic priorities.

Increasingly dire economic conditions in Iran require fundamental economic reform, not symbolic and superficial solutions. The Iranian rial depreciated to 556,500 rials to one US dollar on May 1, marking a nearly 10-percent reduction in the value of the rial in the past month.[11] The *Financial Times* separately reported on May 1 that the Statistical Center of Iran has withheld publishing national inflation data for two months, possibly to conceal evidence of increasing prices. The *Financial Times* added that Iran's inflation rate may have surpassed 49 percent, the highest ever recorded inflation rate in Iran, within the past two months. Raisi's visit to MAPNA—an industrial conglomerate with links to the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC)—on May 1

indicates Raisi's reticence towards such reform. Improving Iran's economy would require limiting the disproportional and disruptive influence that companies like MAPNA have on Iran's economy rather than supporting and encouraging these companies' activities.

The regime's failure to address workers' demands will likely fuel further economically motivated strikes and protests, which may in turn exacerbate Iran's economic situation by disrupting production and economic transactions. Regime officials and employers have responded to workers' demands for better living conditions with repression instead of empathy. Managers of the Chavar Petrochemical Company in Ilam Province prevented 200 workers who recently participated in economic protests from entering the company's petrochemical complex on May 1.[12] Pars Special Economic Energy Zone CEO Sakhavat Asadi separately threatened to dismiss workers who participate in strikes on April 28, as CTP previously reported.[13] The Free Union of Iranian Workers announced that Iranian authorities had summoned at least 50 labor activists in Tehran, Kurdistan, and Gilan Provinces ahead of International Workers' Day.[14]

IRGC Commander Major General Hossein Salami appointed Brigadier General Abdol Reza Abed as Khatam al Anbiya Construction Headquarters Commander on May 1, possibly signaling the IRGC's efforts to strengthen its role in the Iranian economy.[15] The Khatam al Anbiya Construction Headquarters is the IRGC's engineering and development firm. The company oversees large-scale civil-military construction projects. The regime also uses the Headquarters to circumvent international economic sanctions.[16] Salami reported during Abed's introduction ceremony that the Raisi administration had granted 30 major economic projects to the headquarters within the past year and agreed to provide further contracts on a weekly basis.[17] Iranian state-media highlighted Abed's success as the Khatam al Anbiya Construction Headquarters commander from 2005 to 2008 and his ability to combat economic sanctions.[18] Abed also has experience as an executive in the oil, gas, and petrochemical industries.

Salami likely considers Abed to be an appropriate leader for the Khatam al Anbiya Construction Headquarters amid recent intra-regime discussions about privatization, as CTP previously reported.[19] Some regime officials have suggested that parastatal organizations, including the IRGC, should reduce their role in the Iranian economy in favor of privately owned firms.[20] Abed's appointment and Salami's statements indicates the IRGC aims to preserve its involvement in the economy.

Key Takeaways

- **Iranian leadership emphasized fighting corruption and dismissed several economic officials between April 27 and May 1 in a purported effort to improve Iran's economy, although these actions will not likely precipitate meaningful economic change.**
- **IRGC Commander Major General Hossein Salami appointed Brigadier General Abdol Reza Abed as Khatam al Anbiya Construction Headquarters Commander on May 1, possibly signaling the IRGC's efforts to strengthen its role in the Iranian economy.**
- **At least one protest occurred on April 29, at least 11 protests occurred in 10 cities across nine provinces on April 30, and at least 12 protests occurred in 12 cities across nine provinces on May 1.**
- **CTP recorded poisoning incidents in two provinces on April 29, one province on April 30, and three provinces on May 1.**
- ***The New York Times* reported that Former Deputy Defense Minister Alireza Akbari, whom Iranian authorities executed for espionage on January 11, 2023, provided the UK with intelligence on Iranian nuclear and military programs for over a decade.**
- **An unidentified assailant stabbed an unspecified cleric in Qom City, Qom Province on April 29.**
- **Unidentified assailants shot and killed Saravan, Sistan and Baluchistan Province Law Enforcement Command Criminal Investigation Chief Alireza Shahraki.**

- Iranian authorities installed barriers to further segregate men and women in Tehran metros carts on April 30.
- Indian National Security Advisor Ajit Doval discussed Indian-Iranian economic cooperation with senior Iranian officials in Tehran on May 1.
- Saudi Arabia evacuated Iranian citizens fleeing Sudan on May 1.
- Israel Defense Forces (IDF) conducted an airstrike on suspected Iranian-affiliated targets in Homs Province on April 28.
- Iraqi President Abdul Latif Rashid met with Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi in Tehran on April 29.
- Iranian-backed Iraqi proxy Harkat Hezbollah al Nujaba released a series of statements echoing rhetoric from Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.
- Coordination Framework leadership held a meeting on May 1 with Iraqi Prime Minister Sudani and Iraqi Parliament Speaker Mohamed al Halbousi.

Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least one protest occurred on April 29. CTP assesses with low confidence that one protest occurred in the following location:

Tehran City, Tehran Province[\[21\]](#)

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Foreign teachers



At least 11 protests occurred in 10 cities across nine provinces on April 30. CTP assesses with moderate to high confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Esfahan City, Esfahan Province[\[22\]](#)

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Social security retirees

Rasht, Gilan Province[\[23\]](#)

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Social security retirees

Kermanshah City, Kermanshah Province[\[24\]](#)

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Social security retirees

Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province[\[25\]](#)

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Social security retirees

Haft Tappeh, Khuzestan Province[\[26\]](#)

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Haft Tappeh factory workers
- **Notes:** Strike and protest

Arak, Markazi Province[\[27\]](#)

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Social security retirees

Tehran City, Tehran Province[\[28\]](#)

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Air traffic control employees
- **Notes:** Strike and protest

CTP assesses with low confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Shiraz, Fars Province[\[29\]](#)

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Nurses

Torbat-e Jam, Khorasan Razavi Province[\[30\]](#)

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Individuals protesting welfare

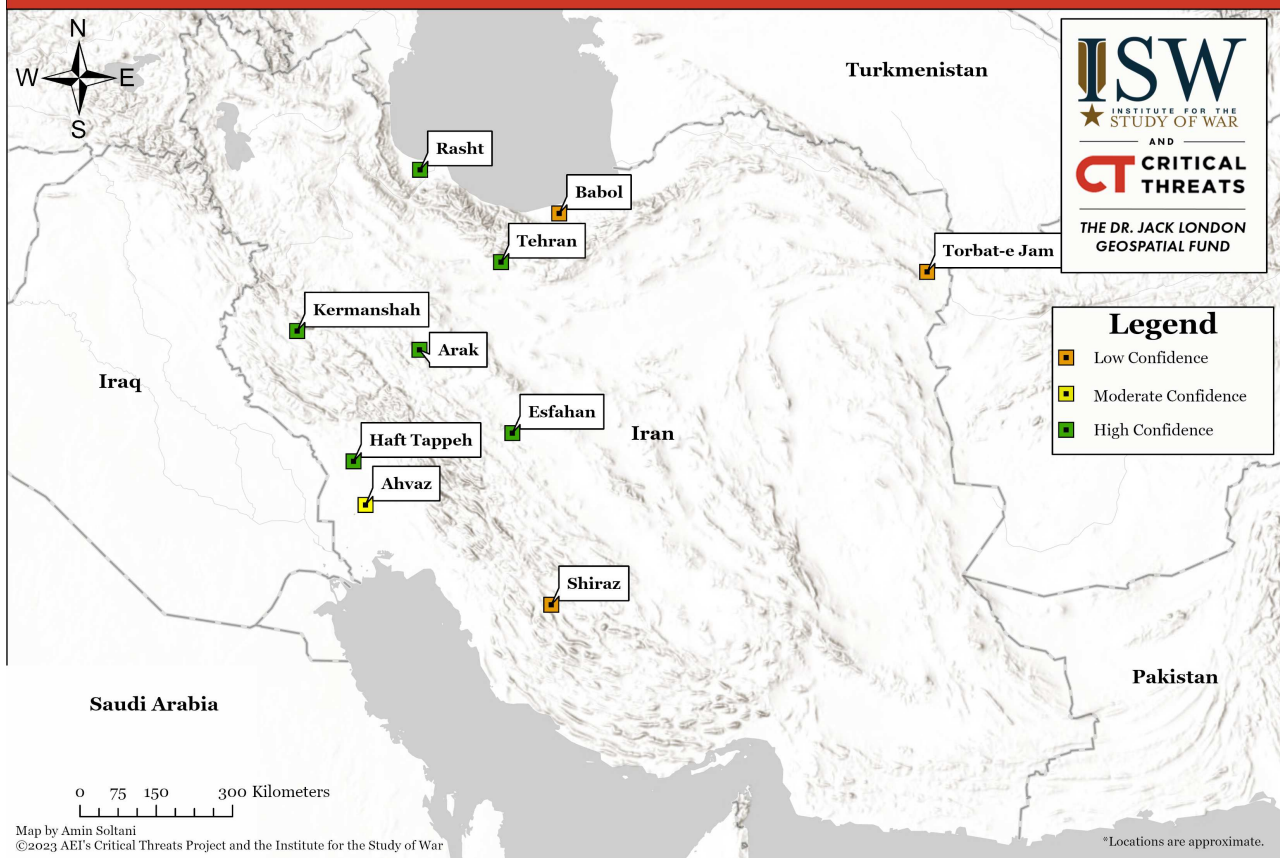
Babol, Mazandaran Province[\[31\]](#)

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retirees

Tehran City, Tehran Province[\[32\]](#)

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Social security retirees

Protest Activity in Iran as of April 30, 5:00PM



At least 12 protests occurred in 12 cities across nine provinces on May 1. CTP assesses with moderate to high confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Rasht, Gilan Province[\[33\]](#)

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retirees

Gheshm Island, Hormozgan Province[\[34\]](#)

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Petrochemical workers

Kerman City, Kerman Province[\[35\]](#)

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retirees

Kermanshah City, Kermanshah Province[\[36\]](#)

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retirees

Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province[\[37\]](#)

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retirees

Shoush, Khuzestan Province[\[38\]](#)

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retirees

CTP assesses with low confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Marivan, Kurdistan Province[\[39\]](#)

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Association of laborers and construction workers

Sari, Mazandaran Province[\[40\]](#)

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retirees

Shahriar, Tehran Province[\[41\]](#)

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retirees

Tehran, Tehran Province

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Anti-regime protesters

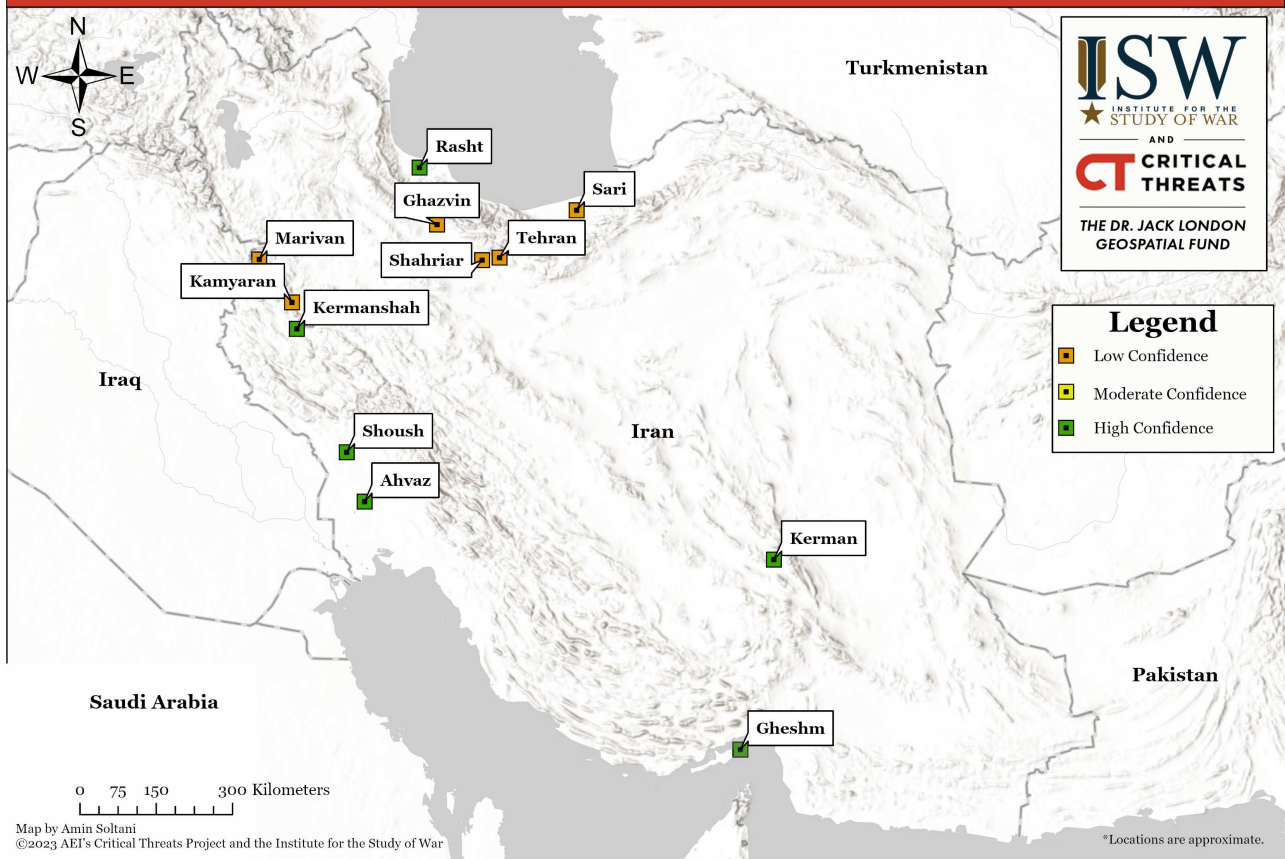
Ghazvin City, Ghazvin Province[\[42\]](#)

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Nurses

Kamyaran, Kurdistan Province[\[43\]](#)

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Construction Workers

Protest Activity in Iran as of May 1, 5:00PM



CTP recorded poisoning incidents in two provinces on April 29, one province on April 30, and three provinces on May 1.

Iran Student Poisonings by Province - April 29

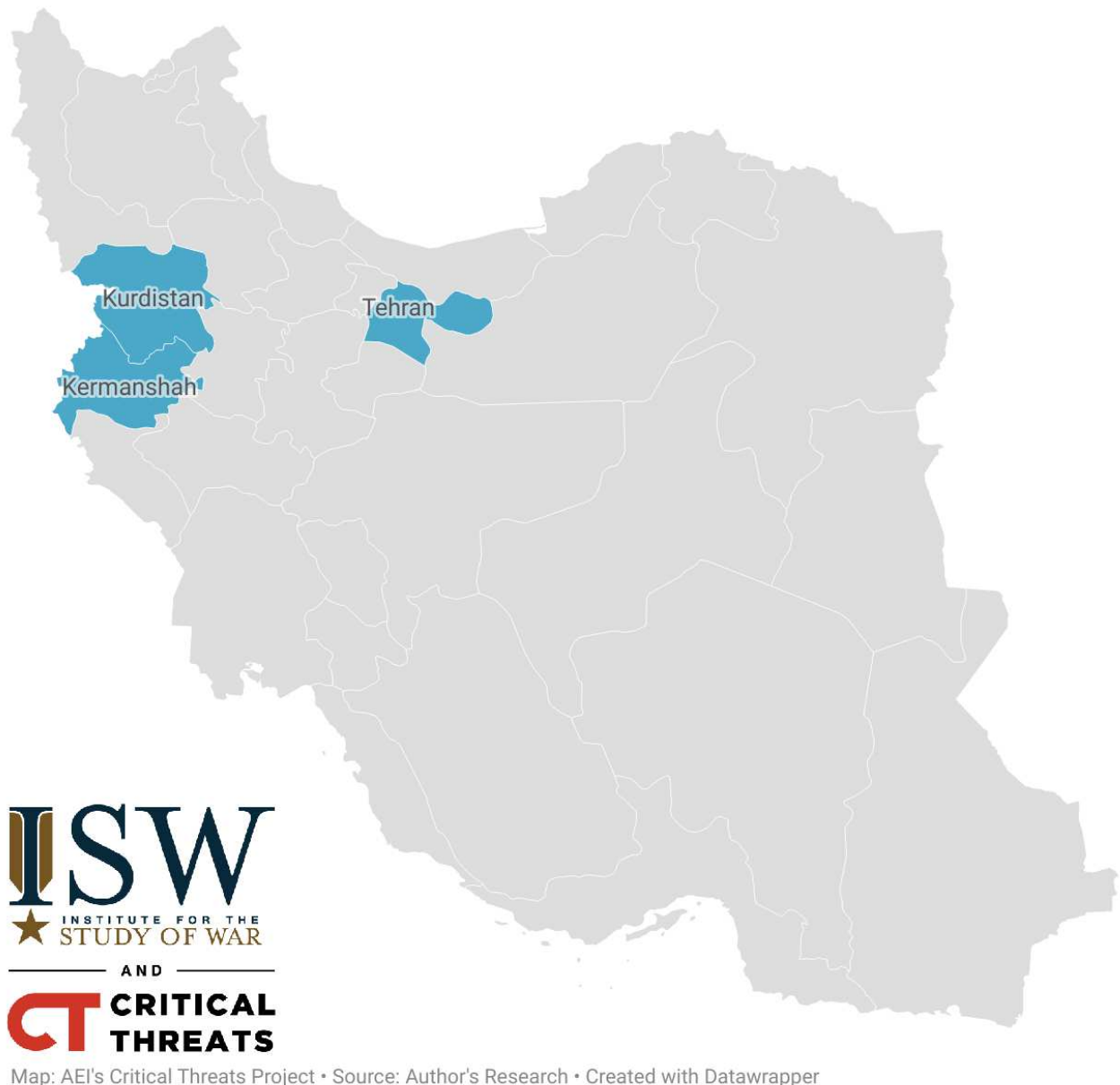


Iran Student Poisonings by Province - April 30



Map: AEI's Critical Threats Project • Source: Author's Research • Created with Datawrapper

Iran Student Poisonings by Province - May 1



The New York Times reported that Former Deputy Defense Minister Alireza Akbari, whom Iranian authorities executed for espionage on January 11, 2023, provided the UK with intelligence on Iranian nuclear and military programs for over a decade.^[44] The *Times* wrote that Akbari forged close relationships with Supreme National Security Council Secretary Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani and Chief Nuclear Scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, whom Israel assassinated in 2020. Akbari reportedly provided initial intelligence on the existence of the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant in Qom Province.

An unidentified assailant stabbed an unspecified cleric in Qom City, Qom Province on April 29. An unidentified man shot and killed Shia cleric and Assembly of Experts member Ayatollah Abbas Ali Soleimani in a bank in Babolsar, Mazandaran Province on April 26, as CTP previously reported.^[45] Social media users separately circulated footage of an unidentified driver purportedly running over a cleric in Tehran City, Tehran Province on April 27.

Unidentified assailants shot and killed Saravan, Sistan and Baluchistan Province Law Enforcement Command Criminal Investigation Chief Alireza Shahraki.^[46] The assailants also injured Shahraki's wife.

Iranian authorities installed barriers to further segregate men and women in Tehran metros cars on April 30.[\[47\]](#) Metro and Suburban Operation Company CEO Masoud Dorosti defended criticisms of the barriers' design—which featured flowers—and stated that the barriers aimed to reinforce gender segregation in the Tehran metro by discouraging men from entering women's carts. Iranian social media users separately circulated footage of Iranian men and unveiled women on motorcycles--flouting segregation and mandatory veiling laws--in Tehran on April 29.[\[48\]](#)

Economic Affairs

See topline text.

Foreign Policy and Diplomacy

Indian National Security Advisor Ajit Doval discussed Indian-Iranian economic cooperation with senior Iranian officials in Tehran on May 1.[\[49\]](#) Doval discussed the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, BRICS, and India's investment in the Chabahar, Sistan and Baluchistan Province port with Supreme National Security Council Secretary Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani. Shamkhani stressed the need to create a "Rial-Rupee" trading mechanism. Doval separately met with Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian to discuss bilateral relations on the same date.

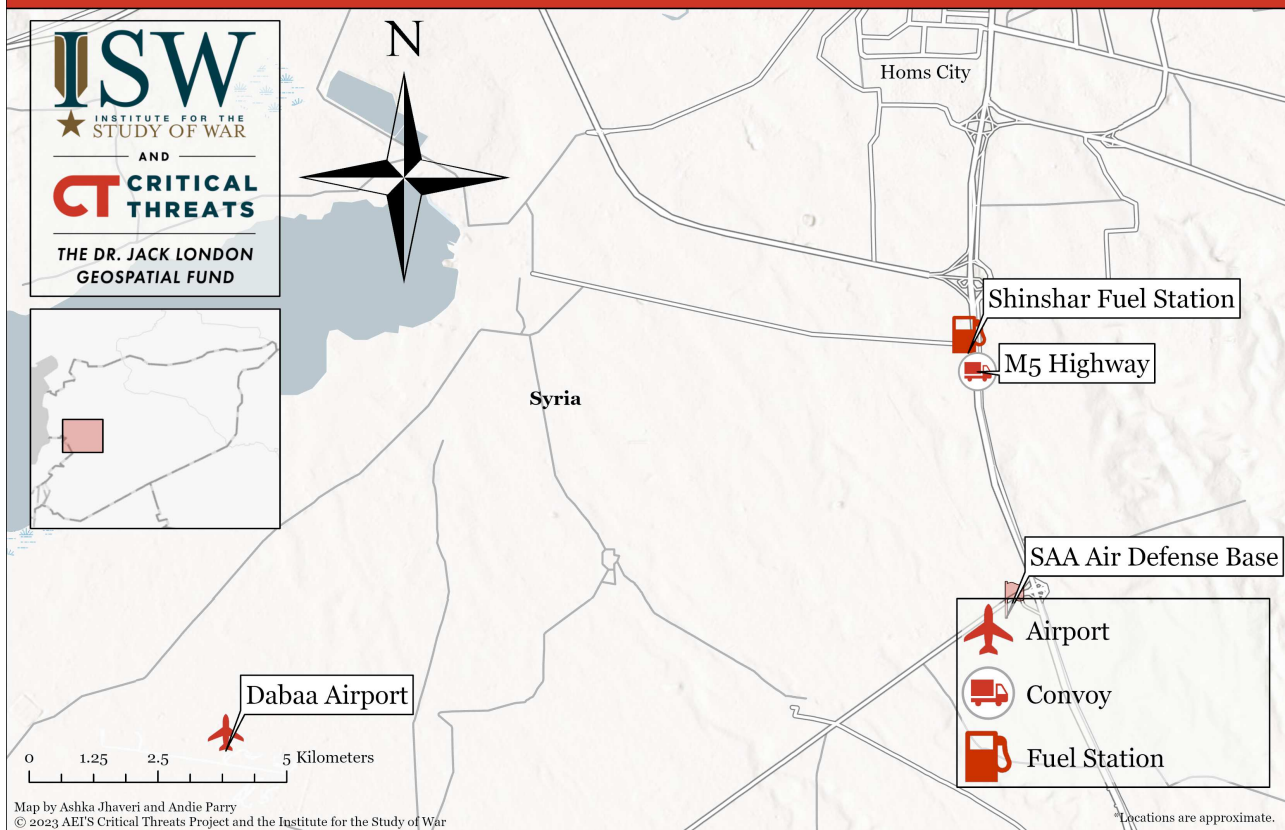
Saudi Arabia evacuated Iranian citizens fleeing Sudan on May 1. The Saudi navy carried 65 Iranian citizens from Port Sudan to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.[\[50\]](#)

External Security and Military Affairs

Israel Defense Forces (IDF) conducted an airstrike on Iranian-affiliated targets in Homs Province on April 28.[\[51\]](#) Syrian and Israeli media outlets claimed the IDF air strike targeted convoy of fuel trucks at a fuel station on the M5 highway reportedly transporting Iranian arms into Syria according to Israeli social media accounts.[\[52\]](#) CTP cannot independently verify these claims. UK-based news outlet *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights* reported that the IDF also targeted a LH weapons depot at Dabaa Military Airport.[\[53\]](#) The IDF last targeted Iranian-backed positions in Homs Province on April 1.[\[54\]](#)

Israeli Airstrike in Homs Province

April 28, 2023



Iraqi President Abdul Latif Rashid met with Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi in Tehran on April 29.^[55] Khamenei emphasized expanding ties between Iran and Iraq.^[56] He claimed that Iraq's ties to Iran have prevented the country from sliding back to conditions seen under Saddam Hussein. Khamenei also called for the Iraqi government to expel all Americans from Iraq claiming that the US is not an ally of Iraq.^[57] Rashid and Raisi held a joint press conference and discussed removing the US from Iraq.^[58] Raisi also called for the Iraqi government to fully implement the security memorandum of understanding the countries signed on March 19 outlining additional security measures in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Iranian-backed Iraqi proxy Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba released a series of statements echoing rhetoric from Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba Akram Kaabi claimed that the Popular Mobilization Forces -- a group of loosely aligned militias ostensibly reporting to the Popular Mobilization Commission -- had successfully blocked Coalition forces from southern Iraq and were capable of targeting US forces in northern Iraq. He argued that despite the US presence, Iraqis in northern Iraq were immune to the soft war that the US is waging. "Soft war" is an Iranian doctrinal term used to describe nonmilitary means that the West uses to erode legitimacy of the Iranian regime and foment domestic opposition while spreading Western values.^[59]

Coordination Framework leadership held a meeting on May 1 with Iraqi Prime Minister Sudani and Iraqi Parliament Speaker Mohamed al Halbousi.^[60] Leadership agreed to conclude negotiations on the 2023-2025 budget by May 10, to move forward with planned ministerial changes, and to hold local elections by the end of 2023.

Iran Update, May 2, 2023

Iran Update, May 2, 2023

Annika Ganzeveld, Amin Soltani, Zachary Coles, Johanna Moore, and Nicholas Carl

May 2, 2023, 5:00 pm ET

Contributor: Andie Parry

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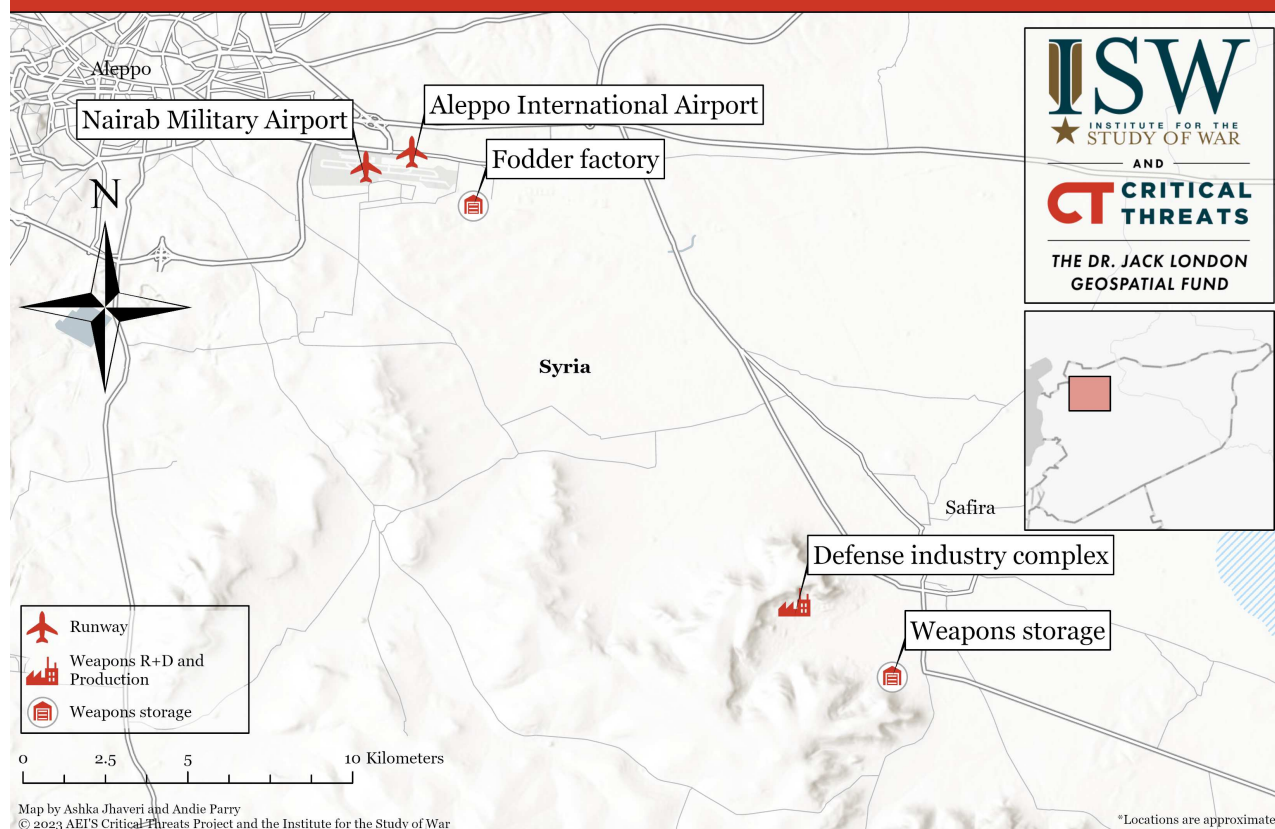
Iranian officials and members of the clerical establishment have expressed increased concern over the safety of religious figures in recent days. Former Intelligence and Security Minister and Shia cleric Hojjat ol Eslam Ali Fallahian called on Friday prayer leaders to learn self-defense during an interview with reformist news outlet *Entekhab* on May 2.[1] The Islamic Propaganda Coordination Council—a regime body responsible for organizing official ceremonies and public events—separately issued a statement on May 2 urging law enforcement and security services to decisively confront “thugs.”[2] The council issued this statement in response to the killing of Assembly of Experts member Ayatollah Abbas Ali Soleimani on April 26. The council chairman—Mohammad Hossein Musa Pour—is a cleric and former governor of Qom City, Qom Province.[3] Law Enforcement Commander Brigadier General Ahmad Reza Radan additionally discussed Soleimani’s murder with Qom Friday Prayer Leader Ayatollah Mohammad Saedi on April 29, possibly to discuss measures to protect clerics.[4]

Iranian-backed Syrian militias may be setting rhetorical conditions to attack US forces in response to Israeli airstrikes in Aleppo Province on May 1. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) conducted airstrikes on Aleppo International Airport and a former chemical weapons production and storage site in Safirah, Aleppo Province.[5] The Assad regime produced and stored chemical weapons at the Safirah site for use in barrel bombs throughout Aleppo Province in 2013, but CTP has observed no indications that Iranian-backed forces use the site for the same purpose.[6] The Aleppo International Airport airstrikes disabled the runway and killed three Syrian Arab Army air defense battalion personnel and possibly a Lebanese Hezbollah field commander.[7] The airstrikes also triggered a series of secondary explosions, suggesting that the airstrikes targeted munitions stored at the airport.[8] Iranian-backed militants traveled to the Safirah facility after the airstrikes, likely to secure the area.[9]

A popular pro-Iranian Twitter account claimed without evidence that the Israeli aircraft traveled through Jordanian and US-controlled airspace in Syria, implying that the US greenlighted the airstrikes.[10] Iranian leaders frequently threaten to hold the US accountable for Israeli actions. Iranian-affiliated social media accounts and militias have furthermore accused the US of tacit involvement in Israeli airstrikes to justify attacks against US forces in eastern Syria in the past.[11]

Israeli Airstrike in Aleppo Province

May 01, 2023



Key Takeaways

- Iranian officials and members of the clerical establishment have expressed increased concern over the safety of religious figures in recent days.
- Iranian-backed Syrian militias may be setting rhetorical conditions to attack US forces in response to Israeli airstrikes in Aleppo Province.
- At least 12 protests occurred in 12 cities across 12 provinces.
- Israeli media reported that Saudi and Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) officials are considering holding talks to improve relations, citing an unidentified European official.

Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least 12 protests occurred in 12 cities across 12 provinces on May 2. CTP assesses with moderate to high confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Esfahan City, Esfahan Province[12]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retired telecommunications workers

Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province[13]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retired telecommunications workers

Sanandaj, Kurdistan Province[14]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retired telecommunications workers

Tehran City, Tehran Province[15]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retired telecommunications workers

CTP assesses with low confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Shahr-e Kord, Chahar Mahal and Bakhtiari Province[16]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retired telecommunications workers

Shiraz, Fars Province[17]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retired telecommunications workers

Ghazvin City, Ghazvin Province[18]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retired telecommunications workers

Bandar Abbas, Hormozgan Province[19]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retired telecommunications workers

Ilam City, Ilam Province[20]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retired telecommunications workers

Kermanshah City, Kermanshah Province[21]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retired telecommunications workers

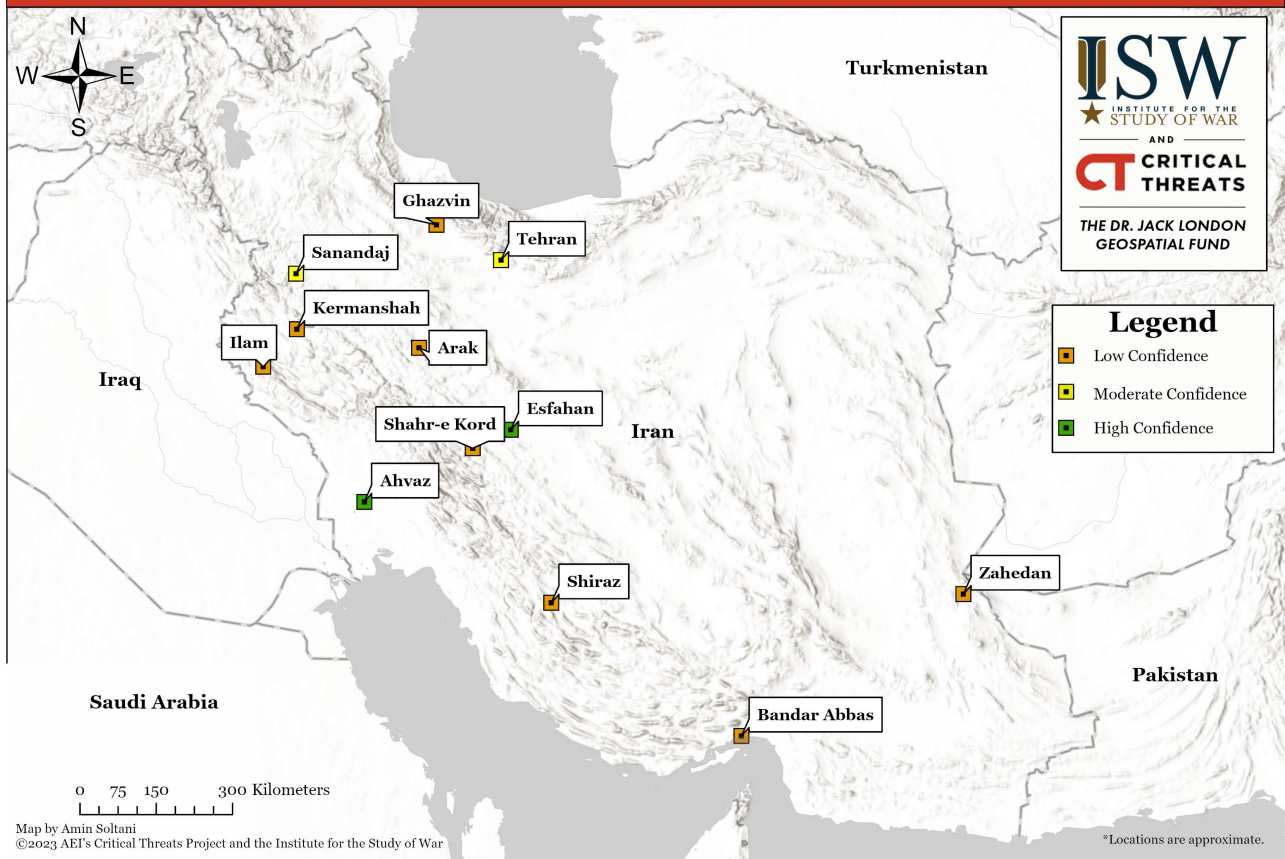
Arak, Markazi Province[22]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retired telecommunications workers

Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchistan Province[23]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retired telecommunications workers

Protest Activity in Iran as of May 2, 5:00 PM



CTP recorded student poisoning incidents in four cities across three provinces on May 2.

Iran Student Poisonings by Province - May 2



Iranian officials and state media are trying to counter recent reports about pro-regime actors confronting women over the mandatory hijab law. Iranian media reported that several “thugs” were harassing women in Sabzevar, Khorasan Razavi Province on April 28 and murdered Hamid Reza al Daghi after he tried to defend these women.[24] IRGC Commander Major General Hossein Salami praised al Daghi as a “hero in the defense of chastity and honor” in a condolence message to his family.[25] Several regime-affiliated outlets additionally reported on the outpouring of popular support for al Daghi, publishing footage of a heavily populated funeral procession and numerous letters praising him.[26] Regime loyalists and morality patrols have recently physically and verbally harassed women over mandatory veiling, which CTP previously reported.[27]

Domestic Affairs

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei stressed educators’ role in indoctrinating Iranian youth and indirectly criticized the Raisi administration during a meeting with teachers on May 2.[28] Khamenei called on teachers to encourage their students to go to mosques and stated that textbooks must include more information on Islamic concepts and famous Iranian and Islamic historical figures. Khamenei additionally criticized the “continuous change” in education ministers, partly referring to former Education Minister Yousef Nouri’s resignation on April 2 and President Ebrahim Raisi’s appointment of Reza Morad Sahraei as acting education minister on April 3.[29]

Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf renewed his calls for “reforms in the area of governance” on May 2. Ghalibaf stated that disorganized decision-making has prevented the regime from resolving the country’s problems and emphasized the need for unspecified governmental reforms during an intergovernmental review and planning implementation board meeting.[30] He also mentioned the need for further cooperation between the Expediency Discernment Council and Parliament during a meeting with senior regime officials.[31] Ghalibaf similarly expressed the urgent need for efficiency and governmental reform as a way of addressing protester grievances on February 23.[32]

Economic Affairs

IRGC officials and IRGC-affiliated news outlets criticized the Raisi administration’s economic mismanagement on May 2. *Tasnim News Agency* published an article criticizing President Ebrahim Raisi for reneging on a promise to allocate one percent of mine sales in West Azerbaijan Province to the development of this province.[33] IRGC Deputy Commander Rear Admiral Ali Fadavi separately blamed Iran’s economic challenges on “authorities not fulfilling their duties” during a ceremony honoring IRGC teachers.[34] These criticisms follow mounting pressure from actors across the political spectrum on President Ebrahim Raisi to fix Iran’s economy in recent days, as CTP previously reported.[35]

Foreign Policy and Diplomacy

Indian National Security Adviser Ajit Doval met with senior Iranian officials to discuss Indian-Iranian cooperation in Tehran on May 1. President Ebrahim Raisi and Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian both stressed the importance of economic and broader strategic cooperation between the two countries in their separate meetings with Doval.[36] The national security councils of both countries published a joint statement similarly emphasizing the need for cooperation on international development projects, fighting terrorism, and addressing the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan among other issues.[37] Doval met with Supreme National Security Council Secretary Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani on May 1, which CTP previously reported.[38]

External Security and Military Affairs

Iranian-backed Palestinian militias conducted several mortar and rocket attacks from the Gaza Strip into Israel in retaliation for the death of an imprisoned high-ranking Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) official. The Hamas-led joint operations room in Gaza claimed responsibility for at least 30 mortars and rockets launched into southern Israel on May 1-2.[39] Israel’s emergency medical service reported three injuries, and local imagery confirms damage to populated areas in Sderot.[40] The joint operations room stated that Palestinian militants fired the rockets in response to the death of PIJ leader Sheikh Khader Adnan, who died after an 87-day hunger strike in Israeli custody.[41] Palestinian militias and other elements of the Axis of Resistance published rhetoric condemning Israel for Adnan’s death, suggesting a degree of coordination on the messaging.[42] Iranian state-controlled IRNA recirculated Lebanese Hezbollah’s condolence message and Iranian Foreign Affairs Ministry spokesperson Nasser Kanani called Adnan’s detention “a crime against humanity”.[43]

Israeli media reported that Saudi and Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) officials are considering holding talks to improve relations, citing an unidentified European official. *I24* reported that LH Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah and Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian discussed initiating talks between Saudi Arabia and LH on April 29.[44] This reporting coincides with Abdollahian’s visit to Beirut on April 28.[45] *I24* also reported that Riyadh is interested in starting negotiations with LH via a third party.[46] It is unclear what any potential LH-Saudi talks would entail, although these potential talks are likely part of the broader rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia in recent weeks.

Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani appointed Badr Organization-affiliated Major General Akram Mudannaf as head of the Iraqi Army’s Diyala Operations Command

on May 2. Mudannaf replaced former Diyala operations commander Major General Ali Fadel Omran, whom former Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al Kadhimi appointed in January 2022.[47] Omran will be transferred to the Iraqi Army's Western Ninewah Province Operations Command to fill the position that Mudannaf vacated.[48] CTP has previously reported that Badr militants are committing acts of sectarian violence against the Sunni population in Diyala Province, which is, in turn, setting conditions to allow ISIS to resurge.[49] Sudani assigning a Badr Organization-affiliated official to oversee security in Diyala will allow the Badr Organization to consolidate additional control over the area and thereby facilitate additional sectarian violence.

[1] <https://www.entekhab.ir/fa/news/724635>

[2] <https://article.tebyan.net/411382> ;

<https://www.farsnews.ir/news/14020212000868>

[3] <https://defapress.ir/fa/news/491927>

[4] <https://t.co/QJMq54P2vH>

[5] <https://twitter.com/JoeTruzman/status/1653142646339289092>; <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israeli-jets-carry-out-airstrikes-against-sites-near-aleppo-syrian-state-media-says/>

[6] <https://www.timesofisrael.com/syrian-rebels-said-close-to-chemical-weapons-cache/>; <https://www.cnn.com/2013/04/26/us-suspects-syria-used-chemical-weapons-...>

[7] https://t.me/SAM_Syria0/4164; https://t.me/SAM_Syria0/4162; https://t.me/SAM_Syria0/4160; <https://twitter.com/JoeTruzman/status/1653142646339289092>

[8] https://twitter.com/Israel_Alma_org/status/1653380255325777920;

[9] <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israeli-jets-carry-out-airstrikes-against-...>

[10] <https://twitter.com/SAMSyria0/status/1653158769231114247?s=20>

[11] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-march-27-2023>

[12] <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1653334332910493698> ;

https://twitter.com/hra_news/status/1653348080610099201 ;

https://twitter.com/RadioFarda_/status/1653357836879921154 ;

<https://twitter.com/bbcpersian/status/1653456909687750657?s=20>

[13] <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1653328791350001664> ;

https://twitter.com/hra_news/status/1653334501982969859 ;

https://twitter.com/RadioFarda_/status/1653357836879921154 ;

<https://twitter.com/bbcpersian/status/1653456909687750657?s=20>

[14] <https://twitter.com/HengawO/status/1653334737862180866> ;

https://twitter.com/hra_news/status/1653337700835942400 ;

<https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1653300005057318917>

- [15] <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1653349024659910657> ;
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- [16] https://twitter.com/hra_news/status/1653337700835942400 ;
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- [17] <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1653336511419490304> ;
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- [19] <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1653334646816473088?s=20> ;
https://twitter.com/hra_news/status/1653341405463433216?s=20
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https://twitter.com/hra_news/status/1653346947632181250?s=20
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Iran Update, May 3, 2023

Iran Update, May 3, 2023

Annika Ganzeveld, Johanna Moore, Amin Soltani and Kitaneh Fitzpatrick

May 3, 2023, 4:00 pm ET

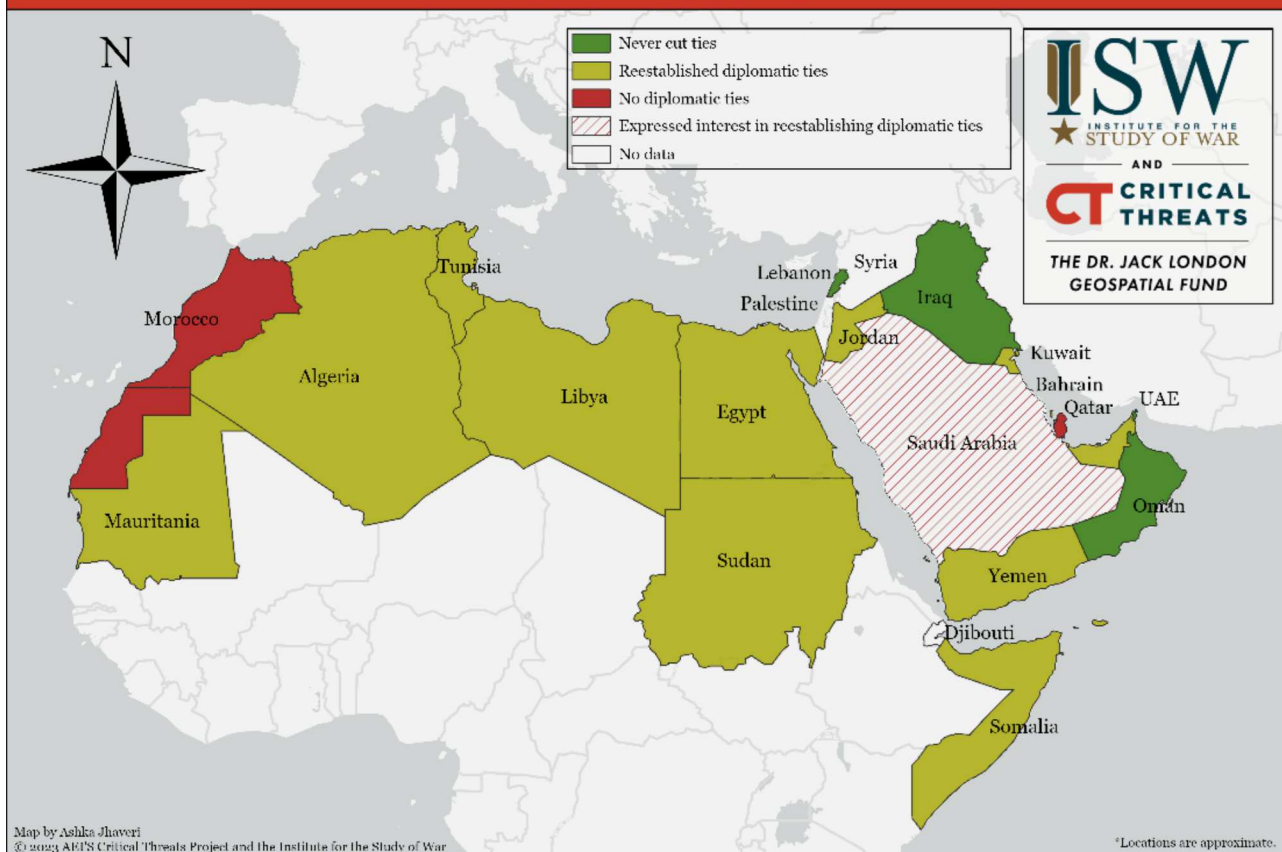
Contributor: Anya Caraiani

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

Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi signed 15 cooperation agreements with Syrian President Bashar al Assad in Damascus, Syria on May 3, which could improve the Iranian economy and increase regime stability.[1] Raisi signed these agreements on the first of his two-day trip to Syria, the first trip an Iranian president has made to Syria since the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011 and Arab Spring.[2] Raisi and Assad signed several memorandums of understanding covering oil, energy, transportation, reconstruction, and communications technology. Raisi also asserted that Iranian companies are prepared to be the primary providers of reconstruction projects in Syria during an interview with Lebanese Hezbollah-run *Al Mayadeen* on May 2.[3] The head of the Iran-Syria Joint Economic Commission and Iran's Roads and Urban Development Minister Mehrdad Bazrpash separately announced on May 3 that the commission established a joint Iranian-Syrian bank to facilitate business transactions between the two countries.[4] The commissioner's announcement of the joint bank while Iran and Syria signed economic cooperation agreements suggests the bank will have a role in funding Iranian reconstruction projects in Syria and transferring payments to Iran. These payments would increase capital inflow to Iran, which would help reinvigorate Iran's deteriorating economy. The role of Iranian para-statal organizations in generating revenue through Syria's reconstruction would not alleviate Iran's high inflation and unstable currency, although the regime may attempt to frame it as such to the Iranian people. Such para-statal organizations include the Khatam al Anbia Construction Headquarters, which is the IRGC's engineering and development firm that oversees large-scale civil-military construction projects and helps the regime circumvent sanctions.

Iranian reconstruction and economic partnership in Syria may include contracts for Iran's Axis of Resistance in Syria, which would provide the groups with an alternative source of revenue to fund their military operations. The Iranian regime had to cut salaries for its proxies and militias due to the compounded effect of US sanctions and COVID-19 measures.[5] Contracts for Iranian-backed proxies and militias would provide other sources of revenue to pay fighters and purchase weapons to support Iran's military posture and influence in Syria. Iraqi proxies already have demonstrated their willingness and capability to take part in Syria's reconstruction. Several of the groups built several hundred apartment units in north-western Syria following the February 6 earthquake which proxies also used to strengthen and expand militia positions as CTP previously assessed.[6] Iranian economic and reconstruction projects would have the added benefit of retaining Iranian influence within Syria at a time when several neighboring countries are engaging in normalization efforts with Syria.

Normalization with Syria 2011-Present



Key Takeaways

- Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi signed 15 cooperation agreements with Syrian President Bashar al Assad in Damascus, Syria on May 3, which could improve the Iranian economy and increase regime stability.
- Iranian reconstruction and economic partnership in Syria may include contracts for Iran's Axis of Resistance in Syria, which would provide the groups with an alternative source of revenue to fund their military operations.
- At least six protests occurred in five cities across five provinces on May 3.
- Iranian officials and clerics continued to express concern about deepening divides between the regime and its populous.
- President Ebrahim Raisi and an IRGC-affiliated media outlet discussed strengthening indoctrination efforts in Iranian schools.
- Reformist-affiliated *Etemad* reported on May 3 that some Iranians have resorted to bartering household goods to afford chicken amid deteriorating economic conditions.
- The IRGC Navy seized the Panamanian-flagged oil and Greek-managed Niovi tanker in the Strait of Hormuz on May 3, the second tanker seized by Iranian naval forces this week.

Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least six protests occurred in five cities across five provinces on May 3. CTP assesses with moderate to high confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Esfahan City, Esfahan Province[7]

- Size: Small

- **Demographic:** Esfahan Art University students, anti-regime protest

Tehran City, Tehran Province[8]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Teachers

Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province[9]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retirees

CTP assesses with low confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

Oroumiyeh, West Azerbaijan Province[10]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Individuals protesting land seizures

Tehran, Tehran Province[11]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Disabled individuals

Ghazvin, Ghazvin Province[12]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Disabled individuals



CTP recorded student poisoning incidents in three cities across two provinces on May 3.

Iran Student Poisonings by Province - May 3



Map: AEI's Critical Threats Project • Source: Author's Research • Created with Datawrapper

Domestic Affairs

Iranian officials and clerics continued to express concern about deepening divides between the regime and its people.[13] Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi discouraged private citizens from enforcing mandatory veiling on May 3 following increased confrontations between unveiled women and regime vigilantes in recent weeks. Prominent Cleric Ayatollah Mohammad Javad Alavi Boroujerdi stressed the need to repair fissures between the clergy and the Iranian population in a tweet published on May 1. Boroujerdi urged Iranian officials to address the population's grievances with the regime. Former reformist president Hassan Rouhani separately published an article discussing the need for regime officials to engage in "critical dialogues" with the Iranian people on May 3.

President Ebrahim Raisi and an IRGC-affiliated media outlet discussed strengthening indoctrination efforts in Iranian schools.[14] Raisi stressed his commitment to stabilizing management within the education system and implementing a cultural document that promotes Iranian-Islamic ideology and pro-regime rhetoric in schools on May 2. IRGC-affiliated *Javan News* separately published an op-ed criticizing the Iranian education system for failing to provide

children with an Iranian and Islamic identity on May 3. Iranian school children spearheaded acts of anti-regime defiance following the Mahsa Amini protest movement.[15]

Economic Affairs

Reformist-affiliated *Etemad* reported on May 3 that some Iranians have resorted to bartering household goods to afford chicken amid deteriorating economic conditions.[16] A shopkeeper interviewed by *Etemad* stated that individuals who were wealthy several months ago are currently unable to afford items such as chicken. A different shopkeeper informed *Etemad* that chicken sales have decreased roughly 50 percent in recent months because of consumers' decreased purchasing power. These reports follow the Wall Street Journal's assessment on May 1 that the Statistical Center of Iran may have intentionally avoided publishing inflation data in recent months to conceal evidence of rising prices.[17]

External Security and Military Affairs

The IRGC Navy seized the Panamanian-flagged oil and Greek-managed Niovi tanker in the Strait of Hormuz on May 3, the second tanker seized by Iranian naval forces this week. Iranian news outlets reported that the IRGC Navy seized the tanker following Iranian judicial orders over an unspecified complaint.[18] The US Fifth Fleet confirmed the seizure and published aerial drone surveillance footage of IRGC fast attack small boats swarming the Niovi.[19] The Artesh Navy seized the Chinese-owned, Marshall Islands-flagged tanker Advantage Sweet on April 27, as CTP previously reported.[20]

Iran Update, May 4, 2023

Iran Update, May 4, 2023

Zachary Coles, Annika Ganzeveld, Amin Soltani, Johanna Moore, and Frederick W. Kagan

May 4, 2023, 4:30 pm ET

Contributors: Ashka Jhaveri and Aleeshyah Lightfoot

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

The Iranian regime is seeking to take advantage of political and economic developments in Syria and Iraq to improve the Iranian economy and advance its strategic goals in the region. Various Raisi administration ministers met with Syrian officials on May 4. Economic and Financial Affairs Minister Ehsan Khandouzi announced the “removal of obstacles” to Iranian export companies operating in Syria following a meeting with several Syrian economic officials. [1] Information and Communications Technology Minister Issa Zare Pour separately signed a cooperation agreement with his Syrian counterpart, Iyad al Khatib, to facilitate Iranian involvement in modernizing Syria’s telecommunications infrastructure. [2] Zare Pour additionally emphasized Iranian satellites’ ability to produce high-resolution images that Syrian officials can use in agriculture, infrastructure, and construction. Defense and Armed Forces Logistics Minister Mohammad Reza Ashtiani and Roads and Urban Development Minister Mehrdad Bazrpash also accompanied Raisi to Damascus. [3] Ashtiani likely sought to secure weapons sales while Bazrpash likely discussed plans with Syrian officials to establish a rail link between Iran and Syria.

The regime may use these economic and political initiatives with the Assad Regime to alleviate Iran’s economic challenges. The Iranian rial reached 556,500 rials to one US dollar on May 1, marking a 10 percent reduction in the value of the rial in the past month, as CTP previously reported. [4] Reformist-affiliated *Etemad* additionally reported on May 3 that some Iranians have resorted to bartering household items to afford basic goods such as chicken due to rising inflation. [5]

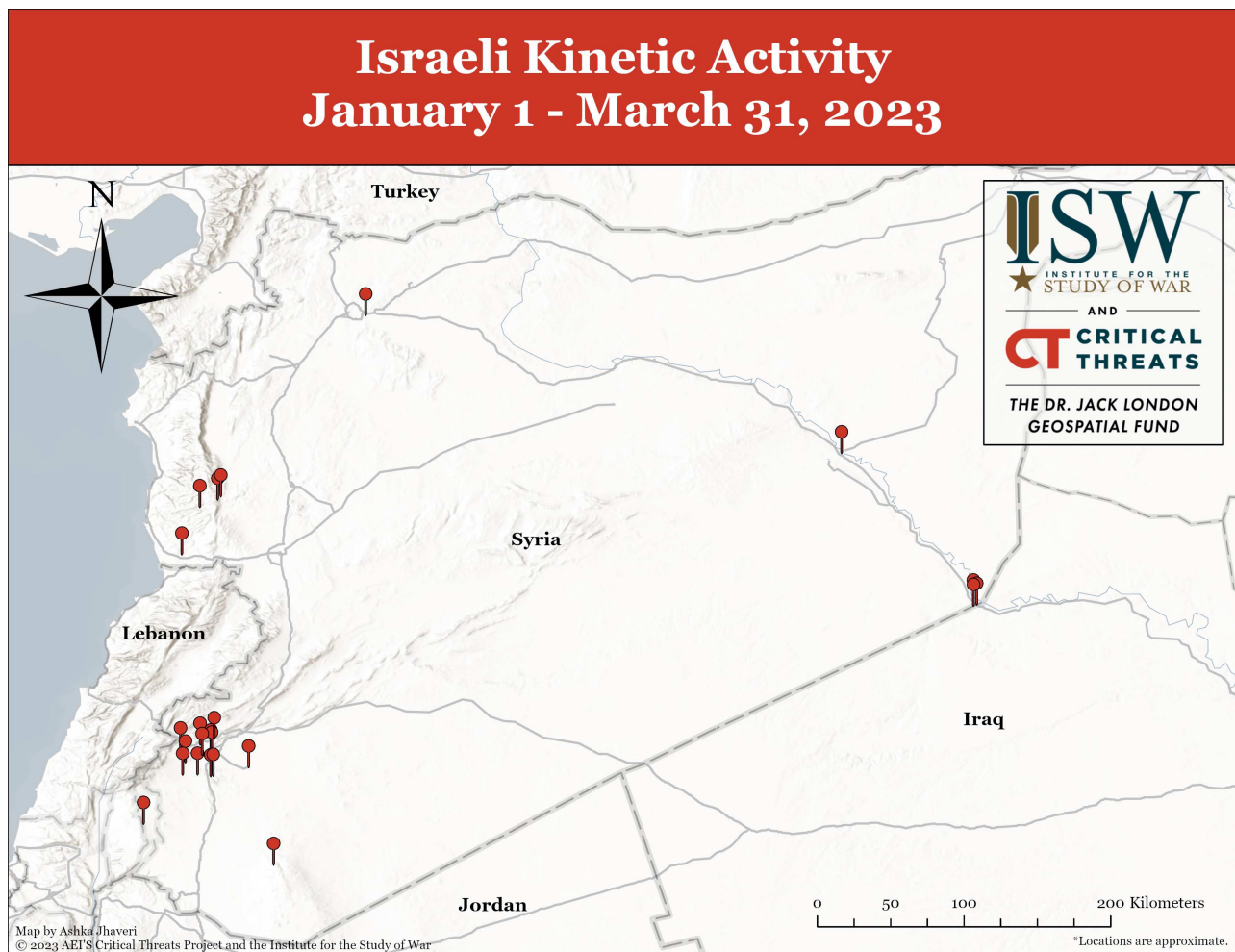
The regime may simultaneously use these initiatives to pay for and increase the Axis of Resistance’s influence in the region. *Al Araby* reported on May 4 that the Iraqi government awarded the Muhandis Company—a contracting company modeled after the IRGC Khatam ol Anbia Construction Headquarters and operated by the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)—infrastructure and development projects across multiple Iraqi provinces. [6] CTP has previously reported that elements of the Iranian-backed Shia Coordination Framework are attempting to modify and capture Iraqi state institutions to enhance their political power. [7] The PMF may similarly use these contracts to amass revenue from the state contracts and reuse them to fund PMF operations in Iraq and potentially Syria. Expanding the PMF’s funding streams may allow it to become more self-sufficient and allow Iran to redirect financial resources previously allocated to the PMF back into the Iranian economy. Iran may also use these contracts to evade sanctions and bring hard currency into the Iranian economy in that way.

Iran may specifically use the Muhandis Company to launder the potential influx in Arab and Gulf state financing that would come with Syrian normalization efforts back into the Iranian economy. CTP previously assessed that Iranian reconstruction and economic agreements with the Assad regime may include contracts for organizations affiliated with Iran’s Axis of Resistance in Syria, which would provide the groups with an alternative source of revenue to fund their military

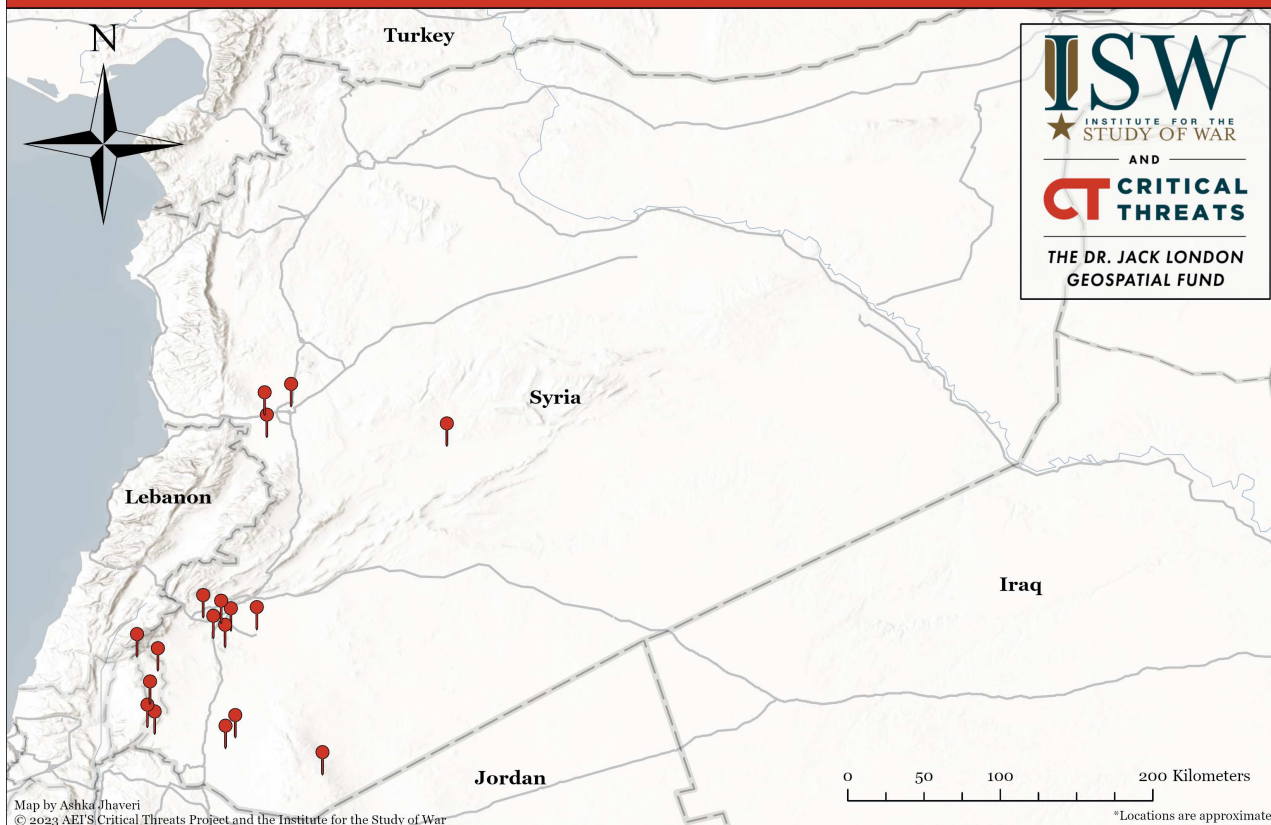
operations.[8] The Muhandis Company could fulfill reconstruction contracts for the Assad regime—with Gulf and Arab state funding—and could use these contracts to facilitate Iranian sanctions evasion.

These economic opportunities will enable the regime to entrench itself further in Syria. The regime's ability to reap the economic, political, and military benefits of reconstruction depends on Iranian and Syrian officials' implementation of the agreements they have signed.

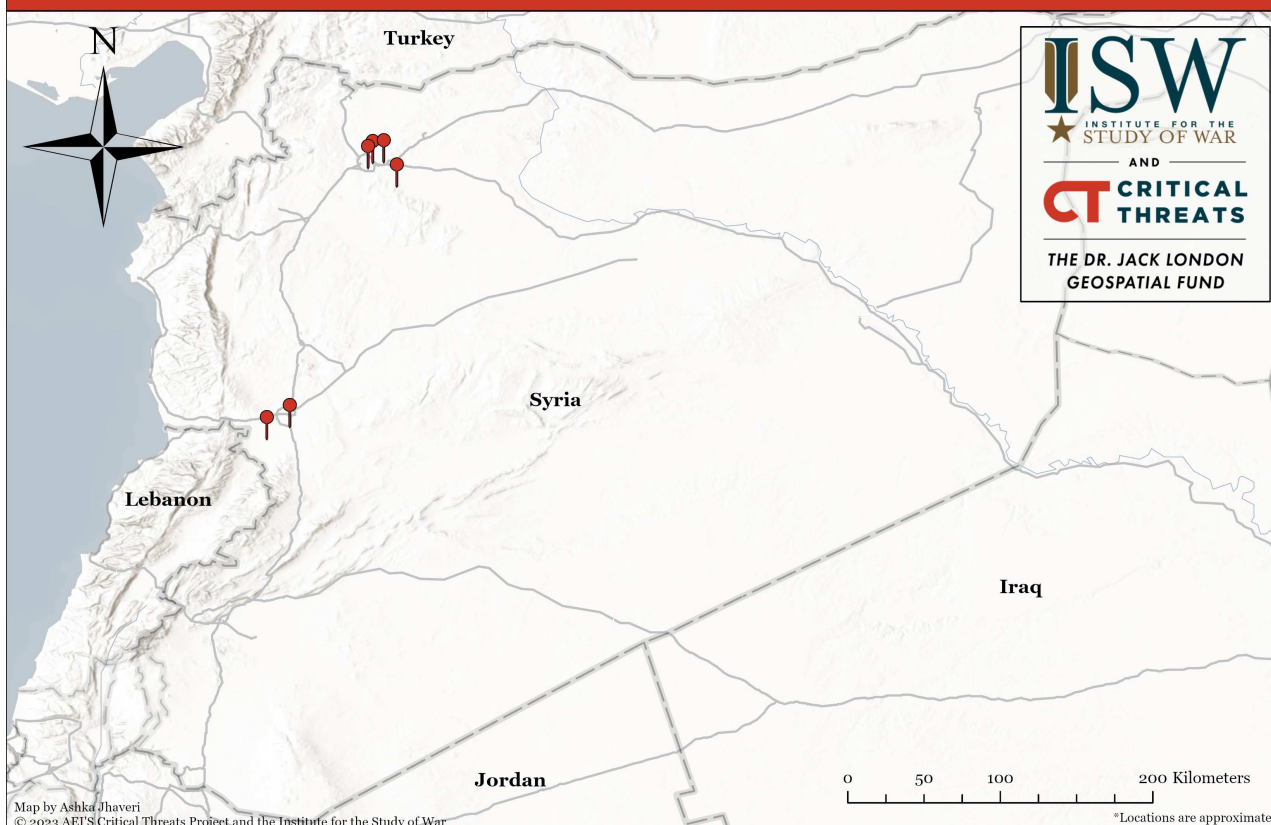
Iran may respond to renewed Israeli airstrikes on Iranian and Iranian-backed forces in Syria by causing Iranian-backed militias to attack US forces ostensibly in retaliation. Israeli combat aircraft conducted airstrikes on Iranian-backed militants at military airports in Homs and Aleppo Provinces respectively on April 28 and May 1, as CTP previously reported.[9] The three maps below illustrate a shift during the month of April in the areas of Syria in which Israeli airstrikes and artillery barrages have targeted Iranian and Iranian-backed militants. Israeli kinetic activity primarily concentrated in southwest Syria in the period April 1-27. Israeli kinetic activity before and after April 1-27 demonstrate a wider array of target locations. CTP previously reported that Israel refocused its airstrikes on Palestinian and Syrian Arab Army locations in southwest Syria at the beginning of April, away from its previous focus on Iranian convoys transporting weapons, lines of communication, and military production sites.[10] Lebanese Hezbollah-aligned social media accounts accused the US of tacit involvement in the May 1 airstrike—a tactic that Iran and the Axis of Resistance have employed to justify retaliatory attacks against US forces in eastern Syria in the past.[11] This rhetorical condition setting suggests that Iran is preparing to renew retaliatory attacks on the US, which it paused for the month of April possibly in response to the shift in Israeli attack locations.



Israeli Kinetic Activity April 1-27, 2023



Israeli Kinetic Activity April 28-May 4, 2023



Key Takeaways

- The Iranian regime is seeking to take advantage of political and economic developments in Syria and Iraq to improve the Iranian economy and advance its strategic goals in the region.
- The regime may use economic and political initiatives with the Assad Regime to pay for and increase the Axis of Resistance's influence in the region.
- Iran may respond to renewed Israeli airstrikes on Iranian and Iranian-backed forces in Syria by causing Iranian-backed militias to attack US forces ostensibly in retaliation.
- Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister for Political Affairs and Chief Nuclear Negotiator Ali Bagheri Kani met with his Irish counterpart, Sonia Hyland, in Tehran on May 4.
- IRGC Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani met with prominent Shia cleric Grand Ayatollah Hossein Nouri Hamedani on May 4 to present a report on the Quds Force's regional activities.
- Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi met with senior Palestinian militia officials in Damascus on May 4, likely to emphasize their increasing integration into the Axis of Resistance.
- *Eye of Euphrates* reported on May 4 that over 200 local recruits for Iranian-backed militias abandoned their posts in Mayadeen, Deir ez Zor Province.

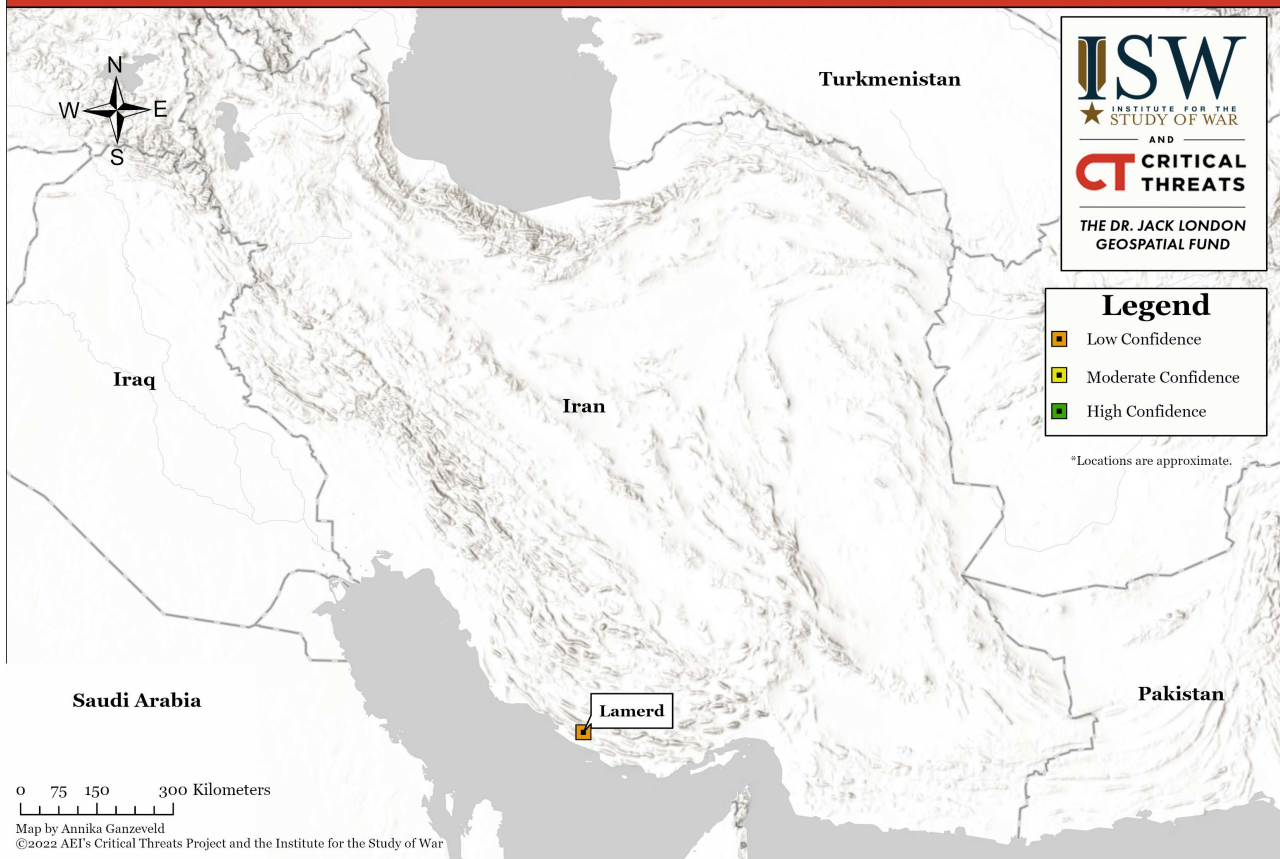
Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least one protest occurred on May 4. CTP assesses with low confidence that one protest occurred in the following location:

Lamerd, Fars Province[12]

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Farmers

Protest Activity in Iran as of May 4, 4:30 PM



CTP did not record any student poisoning incidents on May 4.

Foreign Policy and Diplomacy

Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister for Political Affairs and Chief Nuclear Negotiator Ali Bagheri Kani met with his Irish counterpart, Sonia Hyland, in Tehran on May 4.[13] The two discussed expanding Irish-Iranian relations and unspecified global developments. President Ebrahim Raisi met with former Irish Foreign Affairs Minister Simon Coveney in Tehran on February 14, 2022.[14] Raisi called for enhancing relations between the two countries citing Ireland's independence "in the face of the US and European governments." Ireland was reportedly instrumental in facilitating a series of diplomatic engagements between Iran and other countries over regional issues and the nuclear deal.[15] Ireland plans to open its embassy in Tehran this year.[16]

External Security and Military Affairs

IRGC Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani met with prominent Shia cleric Grand Ayatollah Hossein Nouri Hamedani on May 4 to present a report on the Quds Force's regional activities.[17] Quds Force commanders have previously consulted Hamedani on Quds Force and Axis of Resistance activities. Ghaani presented a similar report to Hamedani and other senior Shia clerics in June 2021.[18] Former Quds Force Commander Major General Qassem Soleimani also met with Hamedani and Assembly of Experts Member Grand Ayatollah Nasser Makarem Shirazi in December 2017.[19] Ghaani separately called on clerics to "enlighten" the population on the importance of resistance during a speech to Qom Seminary students on May 4.[20]

Iranian regime affiliated Islamic Awakening World Assembly (IAWA) published a statement threatening retaliation against Israel for the death of Palestinian Islamic Jihad leader Sheikh

Khader Adnan.[21] IAWA stated that Israel “will pay a heavy price for the martyrdom of Adnan” and “every drop of blood shed in [Palestine]...will shorten the life of the criminal Zionist regime.” Supreme Leader Foreign Affairs Adviser Ali Akbar Velayati chairs IAWA. Other regime officials have similarly published rhetoric condemning Israel in response to Adnan’s death.[22] Iranian-backed Palestinian militants also conducted several mortar and rocket attacks into Israel on May 2. [23] Adnan died after an 87-day hunger strike in Israeli custody, as CTP previously reported.[24]

Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi met with senior Palestinian militia officials in Damascus on May 4, likely to emphasize their increasing integration into the Axis of Resistance.

[25] Palestinian Islamic Jihad Secretary General Ziyad al Nakhalah and Hamas political bureau member Khalil al Hayya led a delegation to brief Raisi on the situation in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and Jerusalem.[26] Raisi emphasized that Iran will continue to support their armed resistance against Israel. Raisi urged Nakhalah and Hayya to continue and maximize military pressure on Israel.[27]

***Eye of Euphrates* reported on May 4 that over 200 local recruits for Iranian-backed militias abandoned their posts in Mayadeen, Deir ez Zor Province.[28]** *Eye of Euphrates* claimed that the militants vacated their headquarters facilities in Mayadeen and outposts facing out into the Central Syrian Desert for fear of US-led international coalition airstrikes.[29] US-led international coalition airstrikes typically do not target these outposts. CTP has previously reported that ISIS militants have conducted attacks on these outposts, however.[30] The militants may have alternatively abandoned their positions for fear of ISIS attacks.

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[6] [https://www.alaraby](https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%87%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%B3-%D8%AA%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%80%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B4%D8%AF-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82) dot co.uk/politics/%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%87%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%B3-%D8%AA%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%80%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B4%D8%AF-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82

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

[25] [https://president \(dot\) ir/fa/143723](https://president (dot) ir/fa/143723); <https://apnews.com/article/syria-iran-palestinians-israel-raisi-65c74708...> [https://www.almayadeen \(dot\) net/news/politics/](https://www.almayadeen (dot) net/news/politics/)-الفصائل-ال فلسطينية- رئيسي-يلتقي-وفدا-من-ال فلسطينية- في-دمشق:-المقاومة-طري

[26] [https://president \(dot\) ir/fa/143723](https://president (dot) ir/fa/143723); <https://apnews.com/article/syria-iran-palestinians-israel-raisi-65c74708...> [https://www.almayadeen \(dot\) net/news/politics/](https://www.almayadeen (dot) net/news/politics/)-الفصائل-ال فلسطينية- رئيسي-يلتقي-وفدا-من-ال فلسطينية- في-دمشق:-المقاومة-طري

[27] [https://president \(dot\) ir/fa/143723](https://president (dot) ir/fa/143723); <https://apnews.com/article/syria-iran-palestinians-israel-raisi-65c74708...> [https://www.almayadeen \(dot\) net/news/politics/](https://www.almayadeen (dot) net/news/politics/)-الفصائل-ال فلسطينية- رئيسي-يلتقي-وفدا-من-ال فلسطينية- في-دمشق:-المقاومة-طري

[28] <https://eyeofephraates dot com/ar/news/2023/05/04/8405>

[29] <https://eyeofephraates dot com/ar/news/2023/05/04/8405>

[30] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/salafi-jihadi-movement-weekly-u...>

Iran Update, May 5, 2023

Iran Update, May 5, 2023

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

May 5, 2023, 4:00 pm ET

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

Contributors: Anya Caraiani

Attacks on Iranian clerics increased during the past month, which may reflect broader public antipathy to the regime's sociocultural and economic policies. Unidentified individuals have attacked clerics in four separate incidents in April, marking a four-fold increase in violence against religious figures compared to January, February, and March 2023. The recent attacks coincide with the implementation of a new veiling enforcement plan on April 15, which uses advanced surveillance technology to identify unveiled women and punishes the owners of public spaces who fail to enforce veiling.[1] Some Iranian social media users have framed the plan as a symbol of regime oppression, which signals public frustration with repressive sociopolitical policies. An individual who seemingly attempted to run over a cleric in Tehran City, Tehran Province on April 27 expressed frustration with being unable to find work, which indicates the economic problems the regime has failed to fix are motivating violence.[2]

These attacks could create fissures between the clerical establishment and the regime. Some clerics--such as Ayatollah Mustafa Mohaghegh Damad and Ayatollah Asadollah Bayat Zanjani--have previously criticized the regime's violence against citizens.[3]

Key Takeaways

- **Attacks on Iranian clerics increased during the past month, which may reflect broader public antipathy to the regime's sociocultural and economic policies.**
- **At least one protest occurred on May 5.**
- **The Iranian regime has increased the pace of state executions, which could reinvigorate anti-regime sentiments in Sistan and Baluchistan Province**
- **Iranian leadership is signaling greater cohesion among Palestinian resistance factions, likely to support their integration into the Axis of Resistance.**
- **Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al Sudani may replace Popular Mobilization Authority Chairman Faleh al Fayyadh according to Iranian-backed Telegram channel *Sabreen*.**
- **IRGC Quds Force Commander of Eastern Syria Hajj Mahdi and IRGC Quds Force Commander of the Albu Kamal rail crossing Hajj Hussein met with a Russian delegation in Albu Kamal City on May 3.**

Internal Security and Protest Activity

At least one protest occurred on May 5. CTP assesses with high confidence that one protest occurred in the following location:

Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchistan Province[4]

- **Size:** Medium

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



CTP did not record any student poisoning incidents on May 5.

The Iranian regime has increased the pace of state executions, which could reinvigorate anti-regime sentiments in Sistan and Baluchistan Province.[5] Iranian authorities executed at least 42 citizens within the past week including 19 Iranian-Balochs, an ethnic group that predominantly lives in Sistan and Baluchistan Province. The regime's discrimination of Iranian-Balochs has historically sparked anti-regime sentiments and activity within the province.

External Security and Military Affairs

Cohesion between Palestinian resistance factions could enable Iran to share resources and capabilities from the Axis of Resistance with the factions more easily. Hamas-affiliated newspaper *Felesteen* boasted about cooperation between Palestinian resistance factions following a rocket attack into Israel on May 2.[6] *Felesteen* claimed "all the Palestinian military factions" coordinated in a Gaza-based joint operations room for the attack.[7] Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi stressed the need for unity and cohesion of resistance forces during a meeting with Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) Secretary General Ziyad al Nakhalah, Hamas political bureau member Khalil al Hayya, and other senior Palestinian officials during his state visit to Damascus on May 4. The meeting likely signaled the integration of Palestinian resistance factions into the Axis of Resistance, as CTP previously assessed.[8] Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani referenced orders from Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in 2014 that directed the IRGC Quds Force to arm militias in the West Bank during a meeting with Ayatollah Mohammed Saeedi on May 4.[9]

Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al Sudani may replace Popular Mobilization Authority Chairman Faleh al Fayyadh according to Iranian-backed Telegram channel *Sabreen*.

[10] An anti-Shia Coordination Framework Telegram account claimed that Sudani plans to appoint Commander of Iraqi Joint Operations Command Abdul Amir Rashid Yarallah as the new Popular Mobilization Authority Chairman after Yarallah.**[11]** An unidentified source cited by Iraqi news agency *Al Rabiaa* denied reports that Yarallah will be appointed.**[12]** CTP cannot independently verify these claims.

IRGC Quds Force Commander of Eastern Syria Hajj Mahdi and IRGC Quds Force Commander of the Albu Kamal rail crossing Hajj Hussein met with a Russian delegation in Albu Kamal City on May 3.**[13]** The Russian delegation demanded Iranian-backed militias allow Russian forces to establish headquarters in Al Baghouz, situated on the Iran-Iraq border, and in Albu Kamal City. The delegation also demanded that Russian forces repair the Albu Kamal bridge crossing the river into Syrian Democratic Forces territory. Mahdi and Hussein rejected the Russian demands.

Iran Update, May 8, 2023

Iran Update, May 8, 2023

Johanna Moore, Annika Ganzeveld, Amin Soltani and Kitaneh Fitzpatrick

May 8, 2023, 5:00 pm ET

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

Note: CTP will not publish an Iran Update between May 9 and 12. CTP will resume publishing Iran Updates on May 15.

Contributors: Andie Parry

Iran is maneuvering to economically benefit from Syria's reintegration into the region, which may enable Iran to circumvent US and international sanctions, as well as support Iranian-backed militias operating in Syria.[1] Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi signed 15 cooperative agreements with Syria on May 3 in a push to be the primary provider of reconstruction projects in Syria.[2] CTP previously assessed that Iran may use the Iranian para-statal organization Khatam al Anbia or Iranian-backed proxy companies to oversee such reconstruction projects. Iranian Free Trade, Industrial, and Special Economic Zones Supreme Council Secretary Hojatollah Abdol Maleki stated on May 6 that plans to establish a free trade zone between Iran, Iraq, and Syria have entered a "technical and implementation stage." [3] Maleki suggested the free trade zone may extend to the Latakia port and the Al Qaim Iraq-Syria border crossing. A free trade zone through Syria, Iraq, and Iran would allow Iran to move materiel across borders without oversight that would normally enforce sanctions on trade with Syria and Iran. The Arab League voted on May 7 to readmit Syria, after which an unidentified Jordanian official claimed that the Arab League will lobby to lift Western sanctions on Syria if the Assad regime agrees to a political solution to end the crisis.[4] The end of sanctions on Syria with the establishment of a free trade zone and Iranian reconstruction projects would enable Iran to circumvent Western sanctions on Iran.

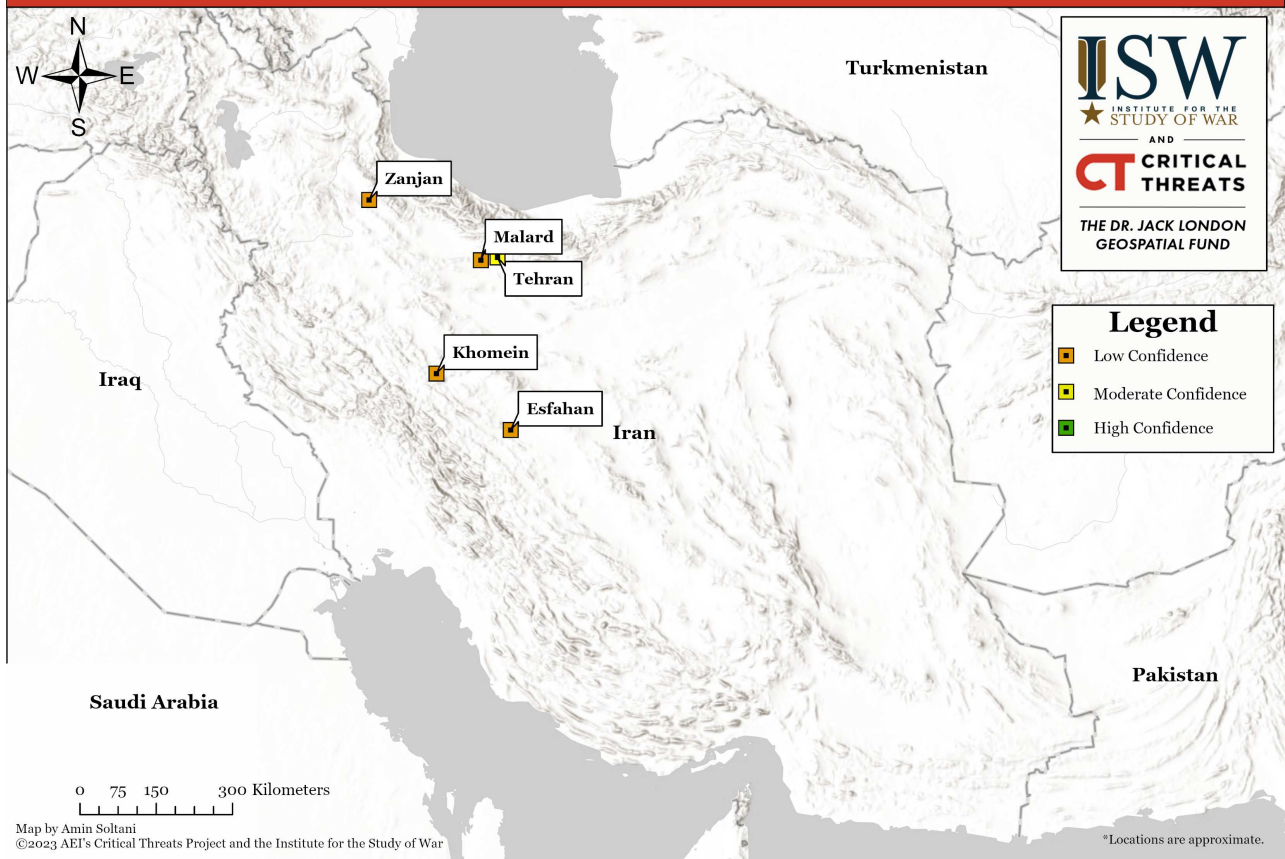
Key Takeaways

- **Iran is maneuvering to economically benefit from Syria's reintegration into the region, which may enable Iran to circumvent US and international sanctions, as well as support Iranian-backed militias operating in Syria.**
- **The Iranian regime is pressuring the relevant parties to resume nuclear negotiations, likely to preempt the reimposition of nuclear sanctions amid a deteriorating internal economic situation.**
- **Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi met with Islamic Revolutionary Guard Quds Force Commander of Albu Kamal Hajj Askar met in Sayyida Zainab on May 3 and 4, according to a report from Syrian opposition outlet *Eye of Euphrates*.**

Internal Security and Protest Activity

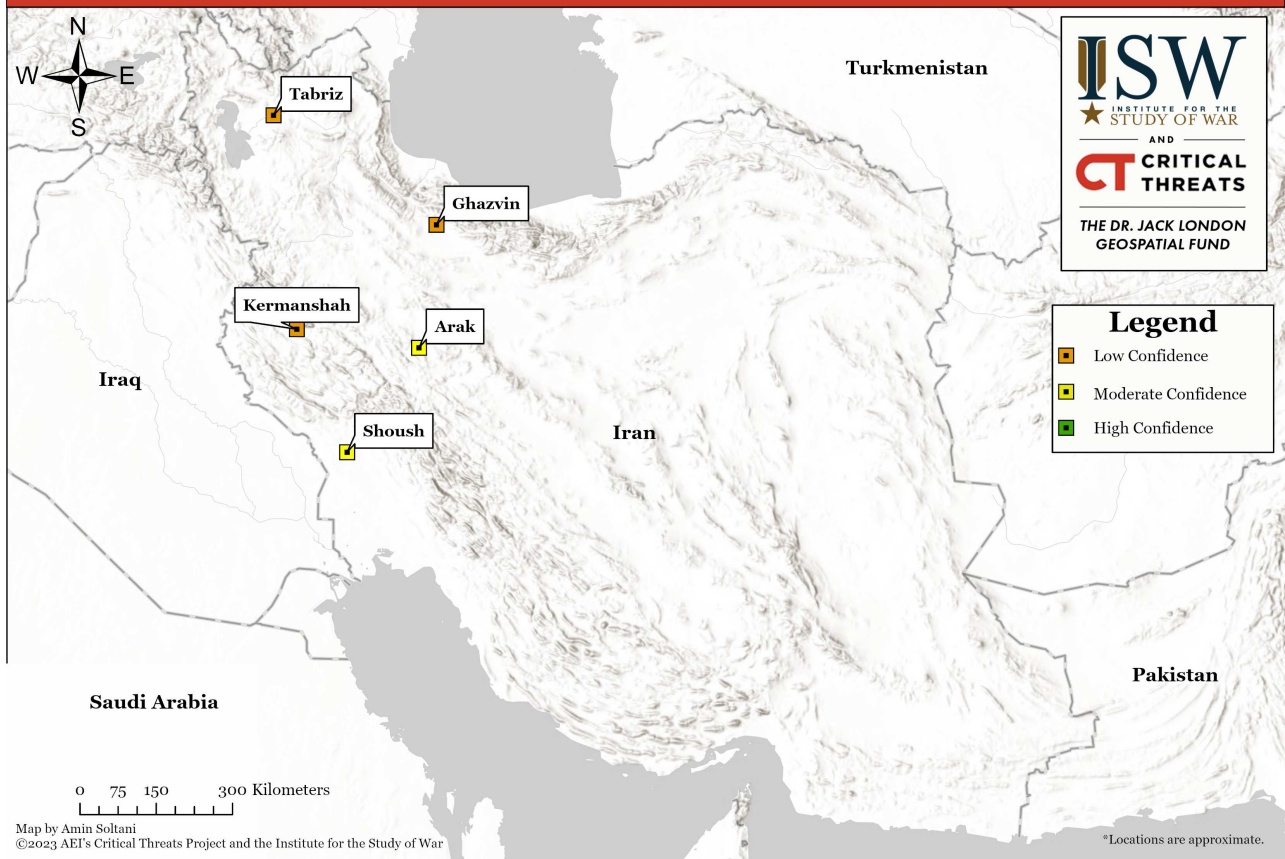
At least five protests occurred in five cities across four provinces on May 6.

Protest Activity in Iran as of May 6, 5:00 PM



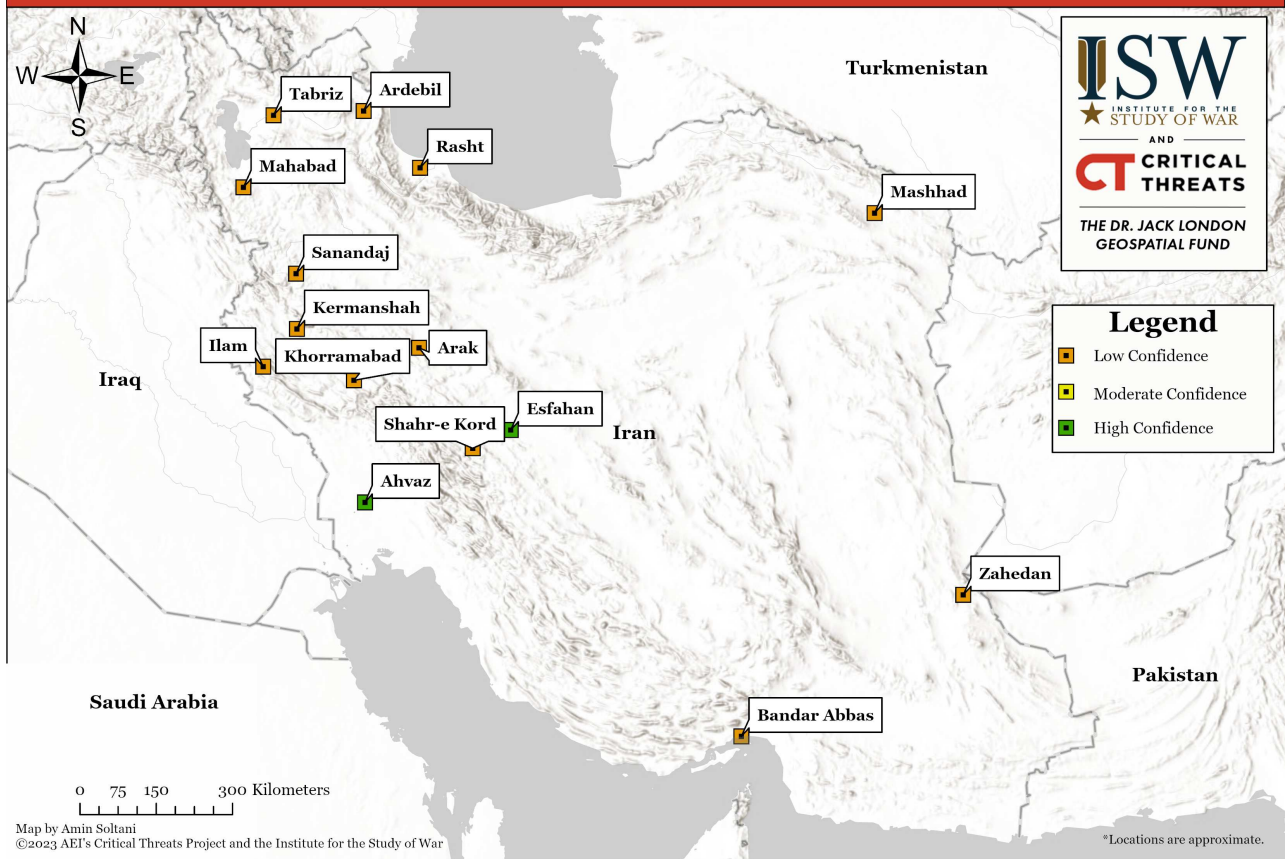
At least five protests occurred in five cities across five provinces on May 7.

Protest Activity in Iran as of May 7, 5:00 PM



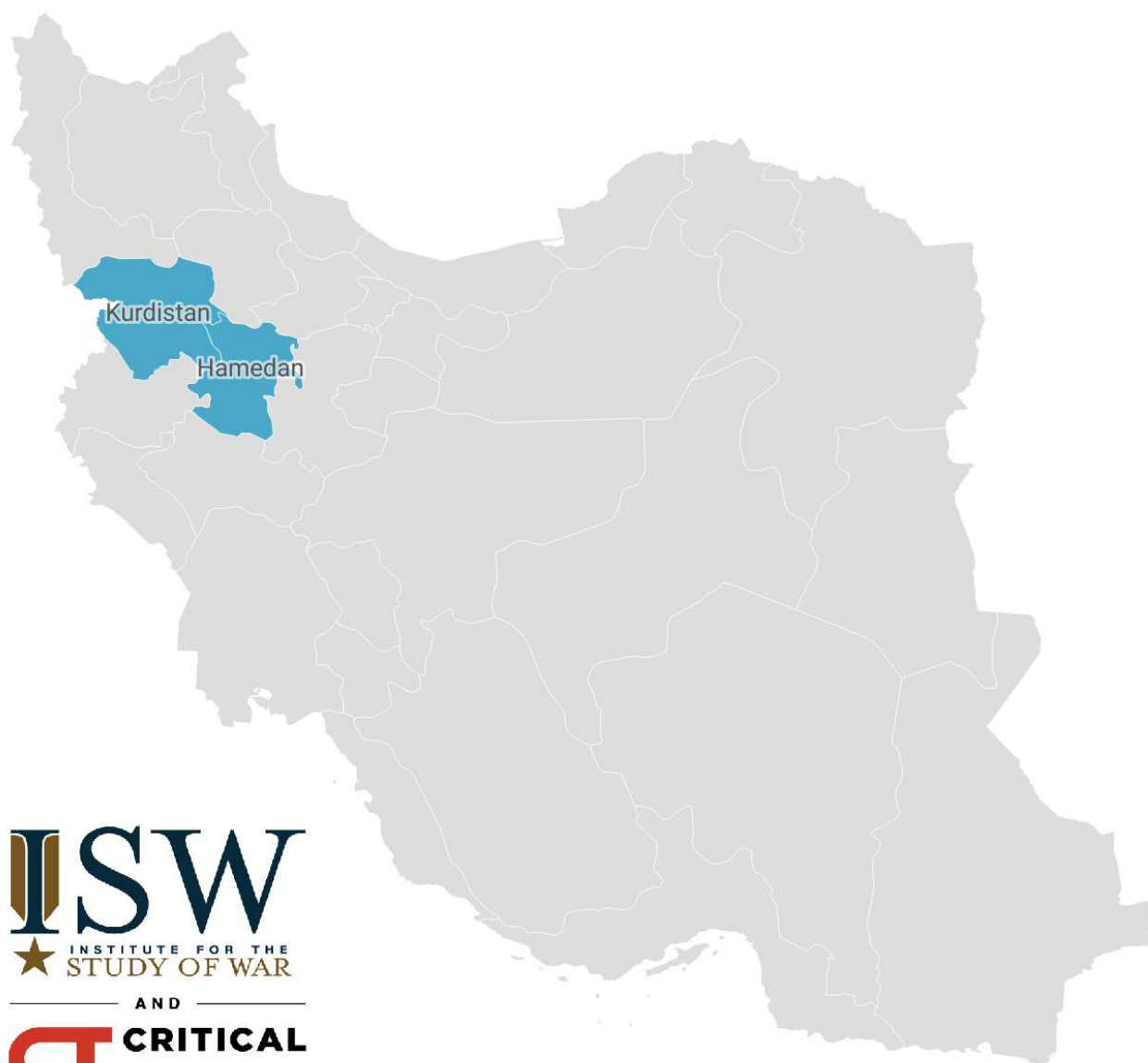
At least fifteen protests occurred in fifteen cities across fifteen provinces on May 8.

Protest Activity in Iran as of May 8, 5:00 PM



CTP recorded student poisoning incidents in 2 provinces on May 6 and 1 province on May 7.
CTP did not record any student poisoning incidents on May 8.

Iran Student Poisonings by Province - May 6



Map: AEI's Critical Threats Project • Source: Author's Research • Created with Datawrapper

Iran Student Poisonings by Province - May 7



Iranian media reported a new attack on a cleric in Markazi Province on May 7, marking a sustained increase in such incidents within the past month.[5] The May 7 attack is the fifth of such attacks, a five-fold increase in violence against religious figures compared to January, February, and March 2023. CTP previously assessed that attacks on Iranian clerics may reflect broader public antipathy to the regime's sociocultural and economic policies and forecasted that continued attacks could create fissures between the clerical establishment and the regime.[6]

Iranian authorities have continued to increase the pace of state executions in recent days.[7] The Judiciary executed a Swedish-Iranian dissident on May 6 and two individuals who purportedly had purportedly insulted Islam on May 8, marking roughly 45 executions within the past several days. This uptick could presage further repression or, conversely, signal the regime's confidence in preempting and suppressing unrest, as executions generated significant unrest throughout the Mahsa Amini protest movement.[8]

Iranian hardliners seek to intensify indoctrination efforts in Iranian schools to preempt anti-regime activity among Iranian youth. Hardline officials and media outlets have advocated for measures that would restrict ideological plurality in Iranian schools in recent days.[9] Such measures include selecting schoolteachers based on their devotion to revolutionary ideals and connecting schools to local mosques, the latter of which will be implemented in Tehran on an

unspecified date. Regime officials have repeatedly stressed the need to indoctrinate Iranian schoolchildren, who spearheaded acts of anti-regime defiance throughout the Mahsa Amini protest movement.

Foreign Policy and Diplomacy

Iranian officials met with several of their Omani counterparts on May 8 to discuss expanding economic, military, and intelligence cooperation between the two countries. Armed Forces Chief of Staff Major General Mohammad Bagheri met with his Omani counterparts Admiral Abdollah bin Khamis al Raisi and Shahab bin Tariq al Saeed in Muscat to discuss joint military and intelligence cooperation and arms sales.[10] Central Bank of Iran Governor Mohammad Reza Farzin and Economic Affairs and Finance Minister Ehsan Khandouzi met with Omani Trade, Industry, and Investment Promotion Minister and Iran-Oman Joint Economic Commission head Qais bin Mohammad al Yousef in Tehran to discuss expanding bilateral economic and commercial relations.[11]

Nuclear Program

The Iranian regime is pressuring the relevant parties to resume nuclear negotiations, likely to preempt the reimposition of nuclear sanctions amid a deteriorating internal economic situation. Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) Director Mohammad Eslami reported on May 4 that the organization has made a series of nuclear advancements in the first phase of its domestic nuclear fuel cycle, significantly expanding its uranium mining and milling activities.[12] A senior Iranian nuclear official stated on May 5 that Iran would leave the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) if the nuclear deal parties were to reimpose UN sanctions.[13] Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian held a phone call with EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Josep Borrell on May 8 to discuss Iran's greater cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).[14] Abdollahian referenced Iran's May 2 reinstallation of IAEA monitoring equipment to assuage European concerns about monitoring Iran's nuclear program.[15] EU3 countries have considered triggering the nuclear deal's "snapback" mechanism for reimposing UN Security Council sanctions.[16] Regime officials have expressed concern over the state of the Iranian economy for several months and the regime's economic policies have failed to address Iran's economic problems, as CTP previously assessed. [17] The reimposition of UN sanctions would exacerbate Iran's economic crisis.

External Security and Military Affairs

Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi met with Islamic Revolutionary Guard Quds Force Commander of Albu Kamal Hajj Askar met in Sayyida Zainab on May 3 and 4, according to a report from Syrian opposition outlet *Eye of Euphrates*.[18] Lebanese Hezbollah-affiliated outlet *Al Manar* reported Raisi visited Sayyida Zainab for religious services on May 4.[19] Raisi met with senior Palestinian militia officials in Damascus on May 4 to discuss cohesion across the Axis of Resistance and support for Palestinian resistance groups as CTP previously reported.[20] It is highly unusual for senior Iranian political leadership to meet with IRGC Quds Force commanders and Iranian-backed militias outside of Iran.

Iran Update, May 15, 2023

Johanna Moore, Annika Ganzeveld, Amin Soltani, Ashka Jhaveri, Andie Parry,
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](#).



Key Takeaways

- Iranian leaders are stoking conflict between Israel and Palestinian militias, likely to enable the IRGC to transfer military equipment into Syria with a lower risk of Israeli interdiction. Iranian weapon shipments into Syria could trigger a new escalation cycle with Israel that risks entangling US and Coalition forces.
- Ultra-hardline political factions are mounting a political campaign against pragmatic hardline Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, likely to restrain him from

pursuing major political reforms. Ghalibaf has been calling for major political and economic reforms for several months.

- The Iranian regime is portraying clerics as allies of the Iranian people likely to prevent further acts of violence against them. Unspecified individuals attacked clerics on five separate occasions in April and May 2023, marking a five-fold increase in attacks against religious figures compared to the first three months of 2023.

Iranian Activities in the Levant

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

Iranian leaders are stoking conflict between Israel and Palestinian militias, likely to enable the IRGC to transfer military equipment into Syria with a lower risk of Israeli interdiction.

Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) coordinated to fire over 600 rockets into Israel from the Gaza Strip on May 11 in retaliation for an Israeli airstrike on senior PIJ leadership.[1] Iranian leaders have encouraged this conflict since then. IRGC Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani released a statement on May 14 pledging Iranian support for the Palestinian militias fighting Israel.[2] Israeli media additionally reported that Iranian officials agreed to pay PIJ \$5 million for each day that they continue to attack Israel.[3] These actions in combination indicate a coordinated Iranian effort to stoke fighting and message to Israel that Iran is coordinating with the Palestinian militias. Iran is continuing to transfer military weapons into Syria while Israel is focused on the Palestinian militias. Two Iranian-backed militia convoys arrived in Deir ez Zor City on May 14, carrying artillery, rockets, and military advisers and fighters.[4] Israel has long sought to prevent the Iranian transfer of personnel and weapons into Syria. Israel Defense Forces temporarily paused airstrikes targeting Iranian-backed militia convoys traveling into eastern Syrian from Iraq after tensions rose between Israel and Palestinian militias in early April 2023.[5] CTP previously assessed that Iran may use such operational pauses to increase weapons convoys into Syria.[6]

Iranian weapon shipments into Syria could trigger a new escalation cycle with Israel that risks entangling US and Coalition forces.

Iran previously sought to consolidate its military position in Syria in February and March 2023, using aid sent after the February 6 earthquake as cover, as CTP previously reported.[7] Israel responded with an airstrike campaign to disrupt Iranian arms transfers into Syria.[8] Iranian-backed militants conducted a kamikaze drone attack on US forces in northeast Syria, killing one American, following an Israeli airstrike targeting an Iranian or proxy officer on March 30.[9]

Iranian Domestic Affairs

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

Regime Dynamics

Ultra-hardline political factions are mounting a political campaign against pragmatic hardline Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, likely to restrain him from pursuing major political and economic reforms.

Iranian media reported that Ghalibaf will run unopposed in the May 23 speaker election. Islamic Revolution Stability Front parliamentarians are now considering nominating their party Secretary General, Morteza Agha Tehrani, to run against Ghalibaf in the upcoming parliament speaker election on May 23.[10] Iranian media reported that Tehrani does not seek to win but only to damage Ghalibaf's political support within Parliament, citing the Stability Front's concern over Ghalibaf's April 18 meeting with moderate regime powerbrokers.[11] CTP previously assessed that Ghalibaf may seek to form a political coalition with these moderate figures to advance his pragmatic hardliner agenda.[12] Ghalibaf has been calling for major political and economic reforms for several months.[13]

Tehrani is a cleric with longstanding ties to the extreme hardline political and clerical establishment. Tehrani and the Stability Front are ardent supporters of former Supreme National Security Council secretary and former presidential candidate Saeed Jalili. Ghalibaf clashed with Jalili and Stability Front parliamentarians over the regime's response to the recent Mahsa Amini protests, as CTP previously reported.[14] Tehrani challenged Ghalibaf for the speakership in 2020 and 2022 and lost on both occasions.[15]

Regime Stability

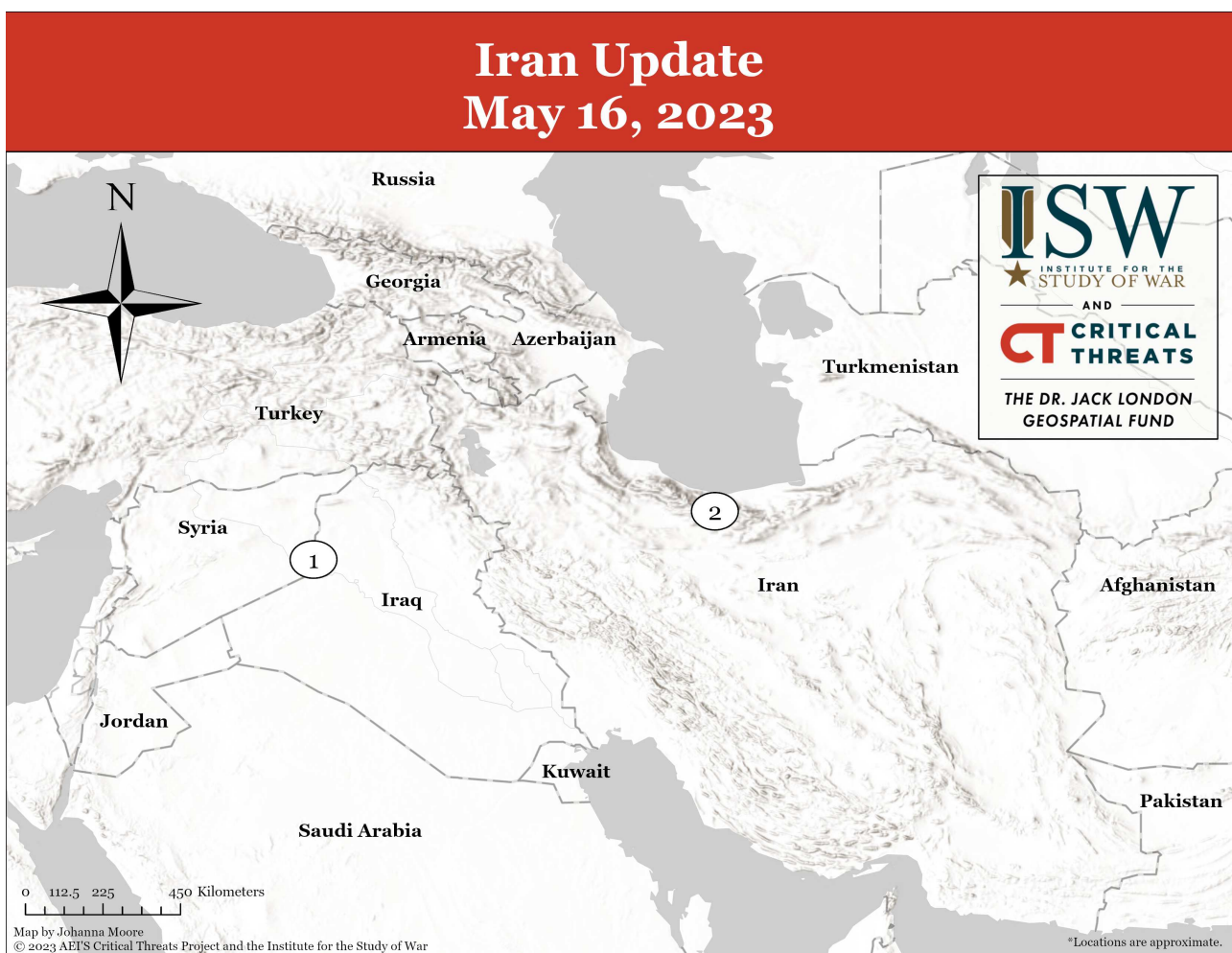
The Iranian regime is portraying clerics as allies of the Iranian people likely to prevent further acts of violence against them. Unspecified individuals attacked clerics on five separate occasions in April and May 2023, marking a five-fold increase in attacks against religious figures compared to the first three months of 2023.[16] Tehran Interim Friday Prayer Leader Hajj Ali Akbari called on Friday prayer leaders and government officials to avoid “marginalizing” unspecified segments of society in his Friday sermon on May 12.[17] This suggests Akbari was calling on regime officials to engage with disaffected citizens rather than isolate them. IRGC-affiliated *Tasnim News Agency* subsequently published a video on May 15 depicting Hashtgerd, Alborz Province Friday Prayer Leader Ruhollah Mokhtari as a likable and relatable figure who plays soccer and enjoys comedy shows.[18]

These measures follow statements from regime officials that have stressed the need to protect clerics since the assassination of Assembly of Experts member Ayatollah Abbas Ali Soleimani in Babolsar, Mazandaran Province on April 26. Former Intelligence and Security Minister and Shia cleric Ali Fallahian called on Friday prayer leaders to learn self-defense during an interview with reformist news outlet *Entekhab* on May 2.[19] The Islamic Propaganda Coordination Council separately called on law enforcement and security services to confront “thugs” on May 2 in response to Soleimani's assassination, as CTP previously reported.[20][21]

Iran Update, May 16, 2023

Ashka Jhaveri, Annika Ganzeveld, Andie Parry, Karolina Hird, and Nicholas Carl

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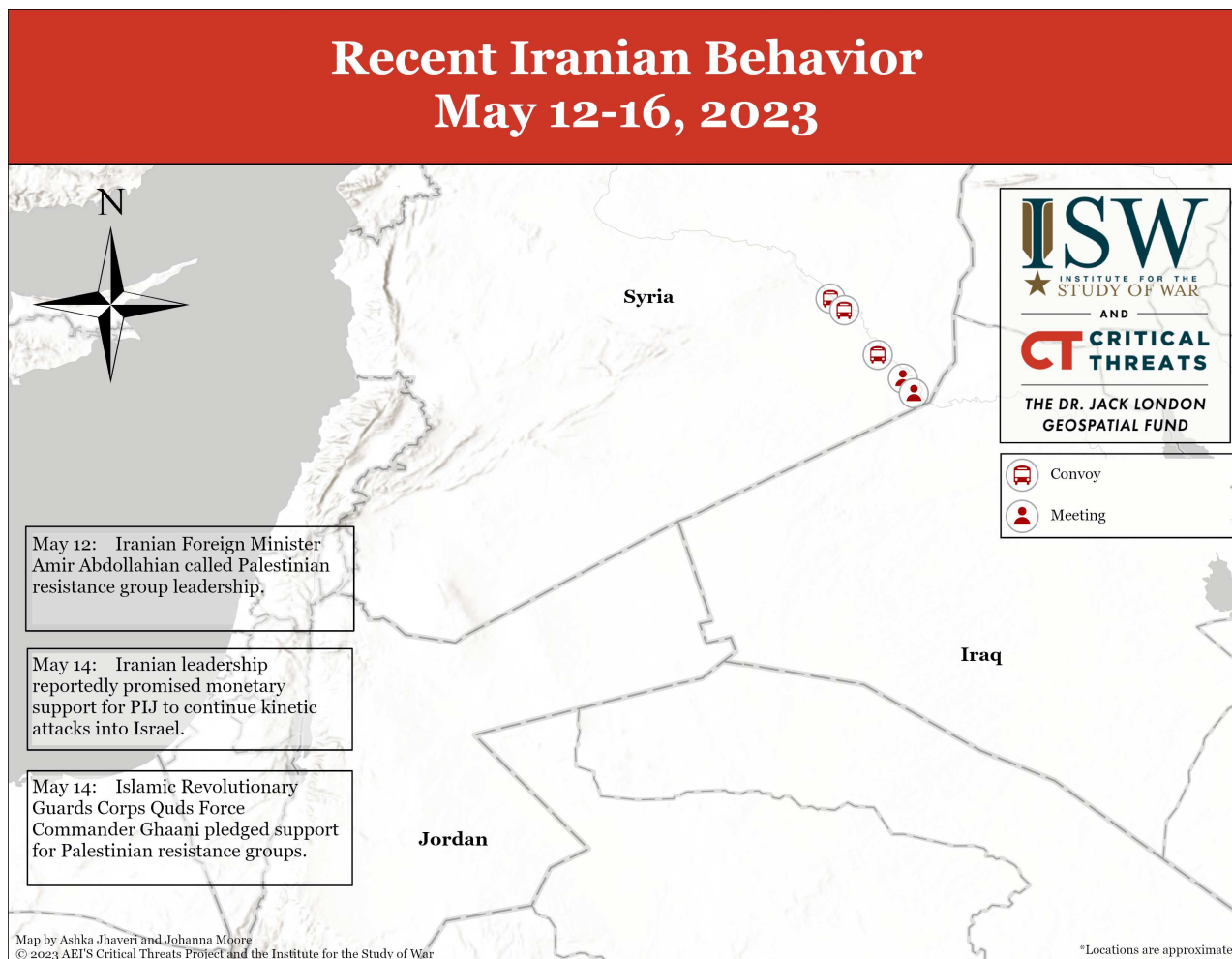


Key Takeaways

1. Iran is taking steps to improve operational security for convoys traveling into Syria from Iraq, likely to protect arms transfers from Israeli airstrikes. Iran also is stoking conflict between Israel and Palestinian militias, likely to enable the IRGC to transfer military equipment into Syria with less risk of Israeli interdiction.
2. Russia is pursuing mutually beneficial economic and military programs with Iran, very likely to ensure Iran continues to provide material support for Russian operations in Ukraine. Iran's acquisition of Russian Su-35s through those deals may enable Tehran to more readily and independently project power in the coming years.

Iranian Activities in the Levant

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



Iran is taking steps to improve operational security for convoys traveling into Syria from Iraq, likely to protect arms transfers from Israeli airstrikes. Iranian-affiliated militias have transferred three convoys into Syria from Iraq since May 12.[1] The Quds Force commander in Deir ez Zor Province met with Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) commanders on May 15 to personally supervise the distribution of weapons and emphasized the need for secrecy.[2] The same IRGC leaders in Deir ez Zor Province separately met with Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces leadership to discuss challenges in eastern Syria on May 15, which indicates continued Iranian concern for cross-border security.[3] CTP previously noted that Quds Force and LH deployments to Deir ez Zor indicated the militias have struggled to preserve operational security as they expand operations in Syria.[4] CTP also previously assessed that leaks from Syrian militia members may have damaged operational security and left Iranian convoys vulnerable to targeted attacks from ISIS or Israeli airstrikes.[5]

CTP assesses that Iranian leaders are stoking conflict between Israel and Palestinian militias, likely to enable the IRGC to transfer military equipment into Syria with a lower risk of Israeli interdiction.[6] Iranian activity in Deir ez Zor Province between May 12 and May 16 indicates Iran is taking advantage of a possible Israeli operational pause to transfer in critical military equipment. The last Israeli airstrike in Deir ez Zor Province was on March 22.[7] Quds Force commanders last met in Deir ez Zor Province to discuss operational security between March 19 and March 22.[8]

Iranian Domestic Affairs

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

Russia is pursuing mutually beneficial economic and military programs with Iran, very likely to ensure Iran continues to provide material support for Russian operations in Ukraine.

Iranian Ambassador to Russia Kazem Jalali announced that Iran and Russia will sign an agreement on the construction of the Rasht-Astara railway line during Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak's visit to Tehran on May 16 and 17. This agreement will link the Iranian cities of Rasht and Astara and create a connection between St. Petersburg and the Persian Gulf.[9] The completion of this rail line has been a long-standing Iranian goal, one that will support strengthening Iran's economy and sanctions evasion efforts. Iran and Russia also are taking steps to further bilateral military cooperation. Iranian media reported on May 13 that Iran will receive its first shipment of Russian Su-35 multi-role fighter aircraft in the coming week.[10] The White House reported on May 15 that Russia seeks to buy additional drones from Iran. Russia has expended most of the 400 Iranian drones it purchased from Iran since August 2022 in attacks on Ukrainian infrastructure.[11]

Iran's acquisition of Russian Su-35s may enable Tehran to more readily and independently project power in the coming years. Iran requested Russian intervention in the Syrian conflict in 2015 to help prop up the Syrian regime.[12] Iran lacked an air force capable of supporting its military operations in Syria and benefited from Russian air power. Russia has militarily deprioritized Syria since it invaded Ukraine in February 2022, leaving Iran without military air support in the country. Obtaining Su-35s would grant Iran significantly greater air power.[13] CTP does not know if Iran has received training on the Su-35.

Iranian-Russian defense and economic cooperation is part of a broader and evolving Iranian-Russian entente. Both sides are engaging one another in several different fields, highlighting the potential for this partnership to deepen and expand further. Artesh Navy Commander Admiral Shahram Irani, for instance, met Russian Navy Commander Admiral Nikolai Yevmenov in Tehran on May 15.[14] Irani emphasized that the West is trying to prevent cooperation between Iran, China, and Russia and praised previous joint naval exercises between these countries. Iranian Oil Minister Javad Owji separately discussed expanding cooperation in the oil and gas sectors with Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak at the Oil Industry Research Institute in Tehran on May 16.[15] Iranian Supreme Court head Ahmad Mortazavi Moghadam additionally discussed judicial cooperation and Iran's membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) with his Russian counterpart Vyacheslav Lebedev in Moscow on May 16.[16]

Iran Update, May 17, 2023

Iran Update, May 17, 2023

Johanna Moore, Ashka Jhaveri, and Amin Soltani

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Key Takeaways

1. Iranian-backed Iraqi militias threatened to attack US forces in Iraq, likely elevating the risk of an attack on US or Coalition forces. The militias do not always follow through with their threats to attack US forces, however.
2. Iran is establishing a military base in southern Damascus, likely accelerating efforts to secure its long-term presence in Syria ahead of Arab-Syrian normalization.
3. Iran has reinvigorated efforts to complete a rail line that connects India to Russia through Iran but is unlikely to complete this project within the next four years.

Iranian Activities in Iraq

This section covers Iranian efforts to consolidate and expand Tehran's economic, military, and political influence in 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-backed Iraqi militias threatened to attack US forces in Iraq, likely elevating the risk of an attack on US or Coalition forces. The militias were responding to a statement from US Ambassador to Iraq Alina Romanowksi about US plans to stay in the Middle East and invest in diplomatic, economic, and security cooperation on May 15.[1] Iraqi proxy façade group Ashab al Kaf and suspected proxy façade group Tuthia al Shiya posted separate calls for attacks on US forces to expel them from Iraq. Tuthia al Shiya rejected any negotiation with the United States and threatened armed resistance.[2] Ashab al Kaf warned that it will target US forces in addition to Iraqis working for American intelligence services, but also called on Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al Sudani to expel US forces from Iraq.[3] Iranian-backed Iraqi militias gain a significant amount of their legitimacy from opposing the US presence in Iraq and responding to instances of American or Iraqi officials commenting on a continued US presence in Iraq. The militias do not always follow through with their threats to attack US forces, however.[4]

Iranian-backed Iraqi militias may conduct IED attacks against US logistics convoys if they follow through on threats. A façade group affiliated with Kataib Hezbollah—an Iranian-backed Iraqi proxy—claimed responsibility for an IED attack on a US logistics convoy in Baghdad on January 18 after Sudani supported the continued US presence in Iraq during an interview on January 15. [5] The claim was circulated on Iranian-backed proxy Telegram channels, which is a common practice following a suspected Iranian-backed proxy-conducted attack.[6]

Iranian Activities in the Levant

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

Iran is establishing a military base in southern Damascus, likely accelerating efforts to secure its long-term presence in Syria ahead of Arab-Syrian normalization. Iranian-backed militants converted land in the vicinity of Sayyidah Zaynab into a militarized area on May 17.[7] The Iranian-backed militants established a military headquarters and barracks, some of which will be weapons storage facilities. The militants also placed berms and cement blocks within a perimeter before reinforcing the area with personnel and weapons.[8] Iran and Iranian-backed militias maintain several weapons storage installations and command centers in Sayyidah Zaynab. Iran establishes military infrastructure, such as headquarters and ammunition depots, to build a long-term presence in Syria. The area was recently the target of an Israeli airstrike on April 3, as CTP previously reported.[9]

Iranian Domestic Affairs

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

Iran has reinvigorated efforts to complete a rail line that connects India to Russia through Iran but is unlikely to complete this project within the next four years. Regime officials have signed numerous multilateral agreements in recent years without progress toward completing the project, which is part of the North-South Transport Corridor (NSTC). Azerbaijan, Iran, and Russia signed a 16-point memorandum of understanding in January to facilitate work on the NSTC. [10] Russia agreed to partially finance Iranian construction of the Rasht-Astara railway on May 17 during a virtual meeting between presidents Ebrahim Raisi and Vladimir Putin.[11] Iranian media described the Rasht-Astara railway as the missing link for the NSTC and estimated that

construction would take four years to complete.[12] Iran faces numerous obstacles before it can complete the NSTC, however. The regime will have to first complete the Bandar Abbas-Ghazvin-Rasht railway, connecting the NSTC to India via the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean, which is the central aim of the project. Iran and Russia will furthermore have to agree to the Russian investment method, the railway design, and operational plans. Azerbaijan, Iran, and Russia will also have to conclude an agreement for making the railway operational through Azerbaijan.

Completing the NSTC would provide an avenue for Iran to evade international sanctions and bolster its domestic economy and regional activities. State media reported that NSTC would generate \$20 billion in annual revenue for Iran upon the completion of the project. Iranian state media argued that the NSTC could rival the East-West transportation route through the Suez Canal. IRGC-affiliated Tasnim News Agency reported that the NSTC would make the transportation of goods to Russia and Europe 50 percent cheaper than using the Suez Canal for India and neighboring states.[13]

[1] <https://www.skynewsarabia.com/middle-east/1621271>

[2] <https://t.me/TuthiatAlshiyeha/45169>

[3] <https://t.me/Alkhuf/801> ;

<https://t.me/Alkhuf/790>

[4] <https://t.me/Alkhuf/776> ;

<https://t.me/Alkhuf/748>

[5] https://twitter.com/Tammuz_Intel/status/1615837816675606535

[6] <https://t.me/sabreenS1/68520>

[7] https://orient-news.net/ar/news_show/203520; <https://aenalsham.com/archives/1600>

[8] https://orient-news.net/ar/news_show/203520; <https://aenalsham.com/archives/1600>

[9] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-april-4-2023>

[10] <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/196322>

[11] <https://president.ir/fa/143951>

[12] <https://president.ir/fa/143975>; <https://www.irna.ir/news/85113646> ; <https://www.irna.ir/news/85113429> ; <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1402/02/27/2896055> ; <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1402/02/27/2896124>

[13] <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1402/02/27/2896055> ; <https://www.reuters.com/world/russias-putin-irans-raisi-oversee-railway-...>

Iran Update, May 18, 2023

Iran Update, May 18, 2023

Andie Parry, Johanna Moore, Annika Ganzeveld, and Nicholas Carl

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



Key Takeaways

1. Iran is trying to expand its economic cooperation, especially energy ties, with Syria to reinforce Iranian influence over Damascus, as Assad pursues improved ties with the Arab states. Deepening Iranian economic influence in Syria will help Iranian leaders revitalize their own economy, especially if Arab states begin to send investment and reconstruction funds to Syria.
2. The Raisi administration issued veiled threats toward the Afghan Taliban, calling on the group to release more water from the Helmand River from Afghanistan into Iran. The Raisi administration is likely concerned that water shortages in the coming summer could fuel protests across the country, especially in Sistan and Baluchistan Province.

Iranian Activities in the Levant

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

Iran is trying to expand its economic cooperation, especially energy ties, with Syria to reinforce Iranian influence over Damascus ahead of Arab-Syria normalization. Iranian Oil Minister Javad Owji met his Syrian counterpart, Firas Kaddour, in Tehran on May 18 to discuss implementing the energy agreements that presidents Ebrahim Raisi and Bashar al-Assad signed in Damascus on May 3.[1] Raisi and Assad also signed agreements relating to reconstruction, telecommunications, and transportation at the time.[2] The contents of the energy agreements are unclear, although Iranian state media has described them as a “road map” to deepen cooperation.[3] The agreements could pertain to Syria paying its debt to Iran, which derives partly from Iranian oil sales to Syria. Iranian officials have claimed that Syria owes Iran around \$30 billion.[4] The agreements could also pertain to resuming contracts for Iran to rehabilitate two power plants in Aleppo and Hama provinces. Iran reportedly canceled the contracts after Assad tried to pay in raw phosphate.[5]

Iranian leaders are trying to reinforce their influence over Damascus—both economically and militarily—as Assad pursues improved ties with the Arab states. Assad traveled to Saudi Arabia on May 18 for the first time since the Syrian civil war began in 2011 and will attend an Arab League summit on May 19.[6] These events mark significant, albeit symbolic, steps toward Assad normalizing his diplomatic relations with the Arab states. Assad will also reportedly meet with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Emirati President Mohammed bin Zayed during the visit to secure reconstruction funding.[7] Iran meanwhile began constructing a military base in southern Damascus on May 17 to entrench its long-term presence in Syria, as CTP previously reported.[8]

Deepening Iranian economic influence in Syria will help Iranian leaders revitalize their own economy, especially if Arab states begin to 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.

Iranian Domestic Affairs

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

The Raisi administration issued veiled threats toward the Afghan Taliban, calling on the group to release more water from the Helmand River from Afghanistan into Iran. President Ebrahim Raisi visited southeastern Sistan and Baluchistan Province on May 18 and stated that Iran will not allow any country to deprive its people of their water rights. Raisi added that the Afghan Taliban should take his warnings about water seriously and “not complain later” that it was unaware of Iran’s demands.[9] Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian separately warned on May 18 that the regime will use “pressure tools” if the Afghan Taliban does not provide Iran with water.[10] These statements follow Iranian Ambassador to Afghanistan Hassan Kazemi Ghomi’s claim on May 15 that Afghanistan only provided Iran with 4 percent of its promised water supply between March 2022-2023, citing a 1973 water treaty.[11]

The Raisi administration is likely concerned that water shortages in the coming summer months could fuel protests across the country, and especially in Sistan and Baluchistan Province. Many Sistan and Baluchistan Province residents rely on agriculture to make a living and some residents protested water scarcity on April 24.[12] Sistan and Baluchistan Province is additionally a historically restive region that is home to a large Sunni Baloch population. Zahedan, Sistan and

Baluchistan Province residents have organized weekly demonstrations since September 2022 to protest regime violence and discrimination against Balochis. The Afghan Taliban may struggle to acquiesce in Iran's demands, however, as Afghanistan faces its third consecutive year of drought.
[13]

Iran Update, May 19, 2023

Iran Update, May 19, 2023

Johanna Moore, Amin Soltani, Kitaneh Fitzpatrick, 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](#).

Contributor: Anya Caraiani

Key Takeaways

1. The Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) are consolidating their footprint in northern Iraq, which will likely increase the risk of sectarian conflict there. A PMF footprint could help Iran secure a new arms shipment route into Syria.
2. The IRGC Navy conducted unprofessional and unsafe maneuvers near a US naval ship in the Persian Gulf, which risks accidental collisions and miscalculations.
3. Anti-regime protests have flared up in Iran in response to increased state executions, demonstrating that many protesters remain undeterred from further protest despite the brutal regime crackdown during the Mahsa Amini movement.

Iran Update | May 19, 2023



- ©2023 AET's Critical Threats Project and the Institute for the Study of War.
- 1). The Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) are consolidating their footprint in northern Iraq, which will likely increase the risk of sectarian conflict there. A PMF footprint could help Iran secure a new arms shipment route into Syria.
 - 2). The IRGC Navy conducted unprofessional and unsafe maneuvers near a US naval ship in the Persian Gulf, which risks accidental collisions and miscalculations.
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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 Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) are consolidating their security footprint in northern Ninewa Province, which will likely increase the risk of sectarian conflict there.

Popular Mobilization Authority (PMA) Chairman Falih al Fayyadh discussed PMF security operations with local officials in the Sunni majority cities Sinjar City and Tal Afar on May 19. Fayyadh praised the PMF's Ninewa-based 53rd Brigade, which is affiliated with the Iranian-backed Badr Organization. He also visited the headquarters of the PMF's 74th Brigade in Sinjar. These meetings come after Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani gave the PMF permission in April 2023 to establish a new Badr-affiliated brigade around Sinjar.[1] Iranian-backed units commonly stoke sectarian divisions as part of so-called "counterterrorism operations." [2] CTP previously reported that Badr militants are committing acts of sectarian violence against the Sunni population in Diyala Province, which is, in turn, setting conditions to allow ISIS to resurge.[3] Suspected Badr-affiliated militants killed Sunni civilians in a series of targeted attacks in Diyala Province in February and March 2023.[4] Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al Sudani deployed Iraqi Special Forces to Diyala in response, however, Badr Secretary General Hadi al Ameri pressured Sudani to remove the forces and secured de facto control.[5] PMF leadership in Diyala province inaccurately claimed that ISIS militants had killed the civilians and arbitrarily arrested individuals.[6] Sectarian conflict presents an opportunity for ISIS to establish itself as a security guarantor for Sunnis.

A growing PMF footprint in Ninewa could also help the IRGC expand its influence along the ground line of communication running from Tal Afar, through Sinjar City, and toward the Syrian

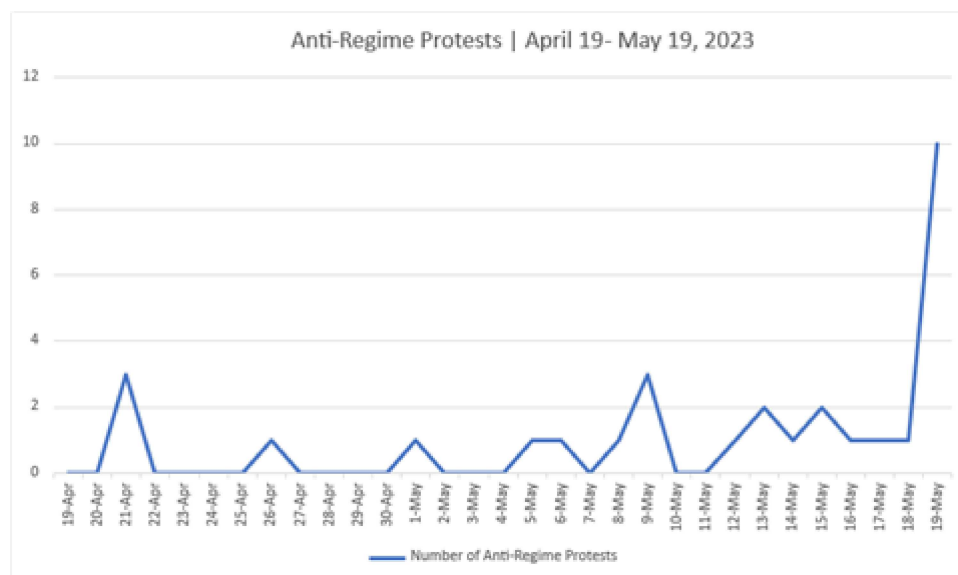
border. The IRGC and its partner militias could use this route to transport arms and personnel into northeastern Syria. The IRGC and Iranian-backed Iraqi militias could also use this area in northwestern Iraq to threaten US forces. The Iranian-backed group in Iraq—Liwa al Ghaliboun—conducted a drone attack on US forces near Hasaka in northeastern Syria from Iraqi territory, injuring six and killing one, on March 23.[7] The IRGC could use a growing PMF presence in Ninewa Province to facilitate additional attacks against US forces.

Iranian Domestic Affairs

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

The IRGC Navy conducted unprofessional and unsafe maneuvers near a US naval ship in the Persian Gulf, which risks accidental collisions and miscalculations. Three IRGC Navy fast attack craft came within 915 meters of the Arleigh Burke-class destroyer USS Paul Hamilton as it transited the Strait of Hormuz on May 19.[8] The destroyer had US, British, and French commanders on board. IRGC Commander Major General Hossein Salami also threatened to expel US forces from the region and reiterated Iran’s commitment to protecting its maritime trade on May 19.[9] The IRGC naval harassment and threatening rhetoric follows the US Department of Defense’s announcement on May 12 that it would bolster the Fifth Fleet’s defensive posture in the Persian Gulf.[10] The US statement responds to the IRGC and Artesh Navy seizing three international vessels passing through the Strait of Hormuz between April 27 and May 12.[11]

Anti-regime protests have flared up in Iran in response to increased state executions, demonstrating that many protesters remain undeterred from further protest despite the brutal regime crackdown during the Mahsa Amini movement. CTP recorded ten anti-regime protests on May 19—the highest number of anti-regime protests in a single day since March 13. Iranian authorities executed three individuals who participated in the Mahsa Amini protest movement on May 19 and has significantly increased the pace of state executions in recent weeks. [12] These executions reinvigorated anti-regime sentiments, as CTP previously forecasted.[13]



Iran Update, May 22, 2023

Iran Update, May 22, 2023

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

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Key Takeaways

1. Iran condemned the Arab League's resolution about arming militias in Syria and is very unlikely to stop supporting its proxies in Syria.
2. Iran is establishing a military base in eastern Syria, likely advancing efforts to secure permanent access to critical transportation routes across the country.
3. Rear Admiral Ali Akbar Ahmadian replaced Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani as the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Secretary on May 22, and is unlikely to change the regime's national security policy.

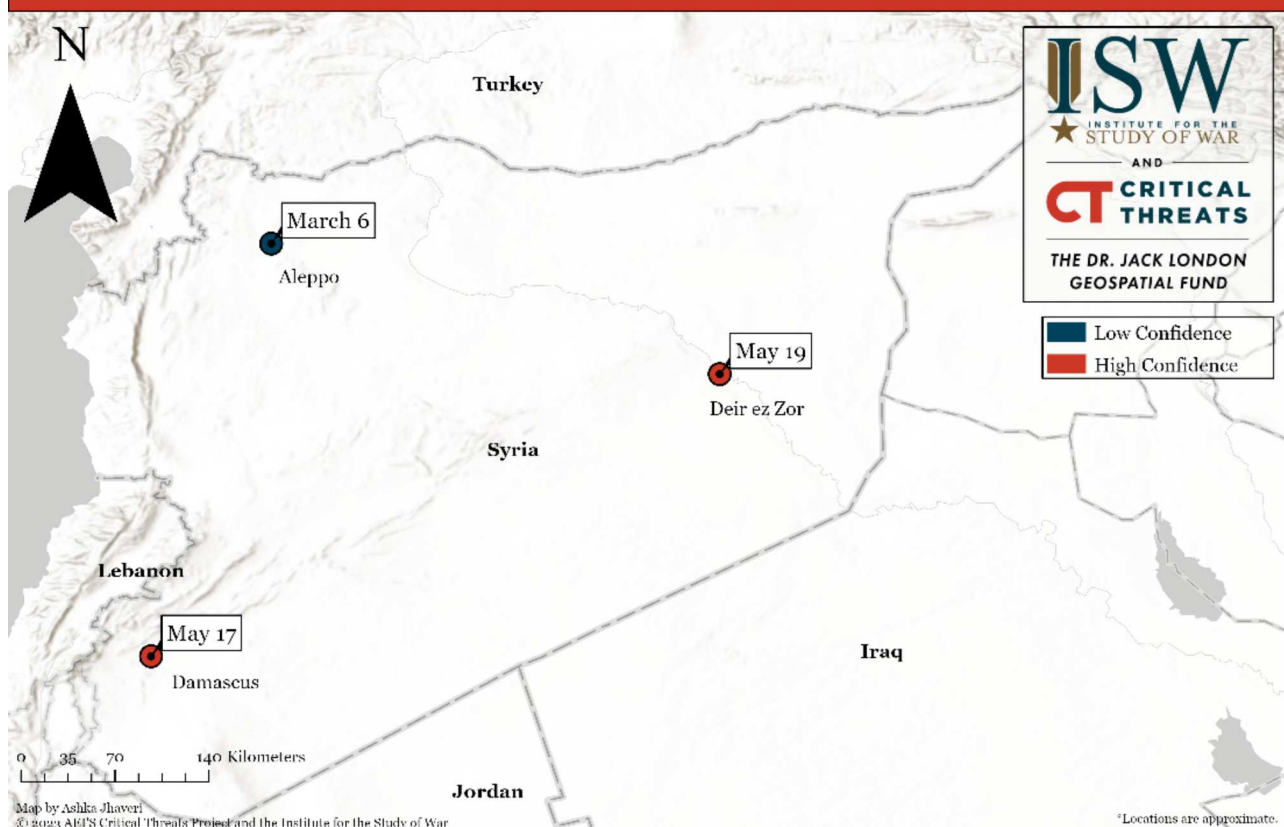


Iranian Activities in the Levant

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

Iran condemned the Arab League's resolution about arming militias in Syria and is very unlikely to stop supporting its proxies in Syria. Syrian state media released the final communique of the Arab League Summit in Jeddah on May 19, which highlighted Arab state unity and uncharacteristically rejected external support for non-state militias.[1] Iranian Foreign Affairs Ministry Spokesperson Nasser Kanani expressed dissatisfaction with the resolution.[2] Bashar al Assad met with Saudi and Emirati leaders in Jeddah to strengthen economic and bilateral ties, demonstrating Assad's increased opportunities for economic engagement with neighboring countries.[3] Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have not indicated willingness or capacity to collaborate militarily with Syria, leaving Iran as one of Assad's key security partners. Saudi Arabia normalized relations with Iran on March 10 and the United Arab Emirates is funding key infrastructure projects in Iran, demonstrating Arab League states' mixed policy toward Iran.[4]

Iranian Military Infrastructure Projects in Syria March 6 - May 19, 2023



Iran is establishing a military base in eastern Syria, likely advancing efforts to secure permanent access to critical transportation routes across the country. The Lebanon-based construction company Jihad al Binaa began building a permanent Iranian military base including a barracks, weapons storage facility, training camp, and dozens of houses for families of Iranian-affiliated militants in Deir ez Zor City on May 19.[5] Jihad al Binaa is a US-sanctioned company that Iran funds and Lebanese Hezbollah operates.[6] A senior Iranian military and religious delegation toured several military sites in Deir ez Zor Province, including the new military base in Deir ez Zor City on May 20.[7] Senior Iranian officials have previously arrived to Deir ez Zor Province to assess operational security ahead of expanding operations in Syria.[8] Iranian militants established two other military bases in Syria that reinforce a long-term Iranian effort to secure

multiple ground and air routes into Syria. Popular Mobilization Forces constructed 500 prefabricated residential units near Aleppo city following the February 6 earthquake and may have used them to establish long-term housing for their troops, as CTP previously reported.[9] Iranian-backed militants began constructing a permanent military base in southern Damascus on May 17. [10] Iranian bases in Aleppo, Damascus, and Deir ez Zor ensure Iran's ability to transfer weapons to its proxy network in the Levant. Ongoing Iranian infrastructure projects indicate that the Arab League resolution condemning arming militias is very unlikely to deter Iranian activity in Syria.

Iranian Domestic Affairs

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

Rear Admiral Ali Akbar Ahmadian replaced Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani as the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Secretary on May 22, and is unlikely to change the regime's national security policy.[11] The SNSC is composed of senior regime officials and is charged with deliberating on Iran's defense and national security policies. Ahmadian is an extended member of the IRGC Command Network, a group of commanders and associates who wield significant influence over regime decision-making.[12] The Command Network is comprised of hardline individuals who are likely to maintain the status quo and who have historically opposed reformist policies. Ahmadian was one of the 24 IRGC commanders who sent a threatening letter to former reformist President Mohammad Khatami in July 1999, warning him that the IRGC would act if he did not rein in reformist currents.[13] Ahmadian is also a member of the Expediency Discernment Council, a governmental body that arbitrates legislative disputes and advises the Supreme Leader.[14] Ahmadian began his IRGC service during the Iran-Iraq War, became IRGC Navy Commander in 1989, IRGC Joint Staff Chief in 2000, and IRGC Strategic Studies Center Head in 2007.[15]

Shamkhani's departure is significant given his ten-year tenure as SNSC Secretary, but not surprising given months-long reports of his departure. Reports in November 2022 suggested that Shamkhani resigned after hardline officials advocated for his dismissal because of his handling of the Mahsa Amini protest movement.[16] CTP is considering the hypothesis that Ahmadian's appointment may have been a partial effort to appease hardline factions who were allegedly dissatisfied with Shamkhani's response to recent unrest. Hardline factions, including the IRGC Command Network, may assess that Ahmadian will be more willing to support future crackdowns on anti-regime demonstrations.

Iran Update, May 23, 2023

Iran Update, May 23, 2023

Johanna Moore, Annika Ganzeveld, Ashka Jhaveri and Kitaneh Fitzpatrick

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Key Takeaways

1. Iran and Iranian-backed militias facilitated the travel of Iranian religious pilgrims into Syria, possibly to expand Iranian influence in Syria.
2. Anti-regime protests organized by Iranian university students have increased in recent weeks, demonstrating the regime's failure to suppress a key demographic of the Mahsa Amini movement.



Iranian Activities in the Levant

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

Iran and Iranian-backed militias facilitated the travel of Iranian religious pilgrims into Syria, possibly to expand Iranian influence in Syria. An unidentified source cited by *Eye of Euphrates* reported that Iranian-backed militias escorted 15 buses operated by the Qalaa Company through the Albu Kamal border crossing carrying Iranian religious pilgrims to Albu Kamal on May 16.[1] The Qalaa Company is closely affiliated with the Iranian-affiliated Syrian Arab Army (SAA) 4th Division Commander Maher Assad. IRGC Quds Force, Lebanese Hezbollah (LH), and Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces then coordinated transportation for religious pilgrims traveling into Syria and to various religious sites. Iran has established schools, cultural centers, and has converted Sunni mosques to Shia mosques in Deir ez Zor Province. Religious pilgrims from an Iranian-backed militia also bought at least 10 homes in Sheikh Yassin and Hamidiyeh neighborhoods, Deir ez Zor City on May 23 with the assistance of the Jihad al Binaa Organization. Jihad al Binaa is an LH-run and Iranian-funded construction company subject to secondary sanctions as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist entity.[2] CTP previously reported that Jihad al Binaa, the same company purchasing homes for militia religious pilgrims on May 23, began construction on homes for families of Iranian-backed militias and religious pilgrims traveling to Syria and several military infrastructure projects in the Al Rasafa neighborhood, Deir ez Zor City on May 22.[3]

CTP is considering three hypotheses to explain these developments. The first is that Iran and Iranian-backed militias in Syria are operating as security for Shia religious pilgrims traveling to and within Syria. Syria contains several prominent holy religious sites for Shia pilgrims and Iran commonly facilitates pilgrimages to these sites as part of its cultural exchange.[4] Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi signed 15 memorandums of understanding with Syrian President Bashar al Assad on May 3, one of which agreed that Iran would send an additional 50,000 religious pilgrims to Syria. [5] Second, Iran and Iranian-backed militias are facilitating pilgrimages and purchasing homes for pilgrims to proselytize and spread Iranian influence in Deir ez Zor. Iranian leadership has developed local cultural centers within Syrian communities to be converted to the regime's version of Shia Islam as a means to extend Iranian regional influence.[6] Third, Iran may use religious pilgrim convoys to transport Iranian-backed militants or weapons shipments into Syria. Unidentified sources claimed that IRGC Quds Force militants used religious pilgrims to transport weapons across the Abu Kamal border crossing on February 5 to prevent being targeted in an Israeli airstrike.[7] Syrian security officials also launched an effort on February 9 to identify Iranian-backed militants who had traveled into Syria with Shia religious pilgrims according to a report from *Deir ez Zor* 24.[8] These three hypotheses are not mutually exclusive and may be occurring concurrently.

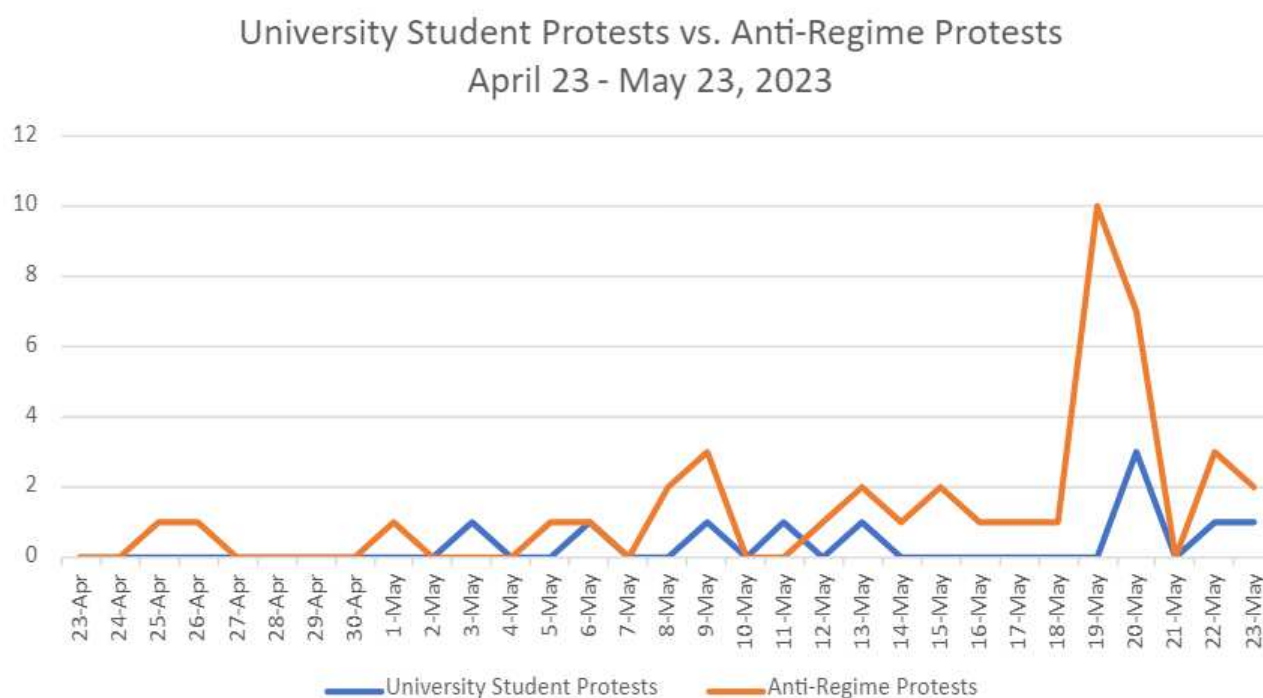
Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) conducted a military exercise in southern Lebanon following a recent escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in Gaza.[9] LH extended a rare invitation to local and foreign journalists to observe the exercise on May 21 ahead of "Liberation Day," the annual celebration of the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Lebanon on May 25, 2000 on May 21. [10] LH official Hashem Safiedinne said in a speech that the exercises were meant to confirm Hezbollah's readiness to confront any aggression.

Iranian Domestic Affairs

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

Anti-regime protests organized by Iranian university students have increased in recent weeks, demonstrating the regime's failure to suppress a key demographic of the Mahsa Amini movement. Student protests have largely been a response to increased state executions.[11] CTP recorded 10 anti-regime protests organized by Iranian university students since May 1, marking a 150 percent increase in university student protest activity compared to March and April 2023. Five of these demonstrations responded to the regime's execution of three Mahsa Amini movement

protesters on May 19, demonstrating that regime violence still has the potential to trigger unrest. The regime may regard university protests as a more serious threat to its stability than demonstrations organized by other segments of the population--such as retirees--since university students largely spearheaded the Mahsa Amini movement between September 2022 and January 2023.[12] The increase in university student protests encompasses a broader trend of growing anti-regime unrest, as depicted in the graphic below.



[1] <https://eyeofeufrates dot com/ar/news/2023/05/20/8570>

[2] <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/hp271>

[3] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-may-22-2023>

[4] <https://www.newarab.com/news/iran-resumes-muslim-shia-pilgrim-tours-syria>

[5] <https://www.irna dot ir/news/85100772>

[6] <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-long-game-syria>

[7] <https://eyeofeufrates dot com/ar/news/2023/03/05/7656>

[8] <https://deirezzor24 dot net/حملة-تفتيش-للعناصر-ميليشيا-الحرس-الثور/>

[9] <https://apnews.com/article/lebanon-hezbollah-israel-exercises-48e1e763e306470713a12eb1c3d25d20>;

<https://twitter.com/JoeTruzman/status/1660307707390459904>; <https://tasnimnews dot com/en/news/2023/05/22/2899516/lebanon-s-hezbollah-displays-combat-capabilities-in-military-drills>; <https://www.almayadeen dot net/news/politics/%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%AD%D8%B2%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87-%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AD-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%87%D8%AC%D9%88%D9%85-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%85-%D8%A3%D8%B9%D8%B8%D9%85>; <https://almanar dot com.lb/10644218>

[10] <https://apnews.com/article/lebanon-hezbollah-israel-exercises-48e1e763e306470713a12eb1c3d25d20>; <https://twitter.com/JoeTruzman/status/1660307707390459904>; <https://tasnimnews.com/en/news/2023/05/22/2899516/lebanon-s-hezbollah-displays-combat-capabilities-in-military-drills>; <https://www.almayadeen.net/news/politics/%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%AD%D8%B2%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87:-%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AD-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%87%D8%AC%D9%88%D9%85-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%85-%D8%A3%D8%B9%D8%B8%D9%85>; <https://almanar.com.lb/10644218>

[11] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-may-5-2023>

[12] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-october-3>

Iran Update, May 24, 2023

Iran Update, May 24, 2023

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

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Key Takeaways

1. Iran has transferred unsophisticated air defense weapons to Syria, possibly to protect advanced weapons shipments and IRGC Quds Force commanders from Israeli drone strikes.
2. The Raisi administration is pursuing greater economic cooperation with Indonesia, which could help Iran evade sanctions by transporting oil to China via Indonesia.
3. Media reports discussing former Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Secretary Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani may reflect an intra-regime struggle over Shamkhani's future political trajectory.



Iranian Activities in the Levant

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

Iran has transferred unsophisticated air defense weapons to Syria, possibly to protect advanced weapons shipments and IRGC Quds Force commanders from Israeli drone strikes. Iranian shipments of advanced air defense equipment and precision guided munitions that arrived in Syria through the Albu Kamal border crossing in Deir ez Zor Province were the targets of Israeli drone strikes in February and March, as CTP previously reported.[1] Israeli drone strikes also killed IRGC Quds Force Commanders in Damascus and Deir ez Zor.[2] Iran and Iranian-backed militias delivered man portable air defense systems (MANPADs) to Al Mayadeen, Deir ez Zor Province in April 20, as CTP also reported.[3] Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces and Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH) also reinforced areas around the Albu Kamal border area with 12.7 caliber anti-aircraft machine guns on May 23.[4] MANPADs and anti-aircraft machine guns are less capable of defending Iranian positions in Syria than the surface-to-air missile systems Iran seeks to transfer to Syria, but are suitable for use against drones.[5] Iran's transfer of MANPADs and anti-aircraft machine guns has not prompted Israeli airstrikes or drone strikes against Iranian convoys or positions in Deir ez Zor.

Iranian Domestic Affairs

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

The Raisi administration is pursuing greater economic cooperation with Indonesia, which could help Iran evade sanctions by transporting oil to China via Indonesia. President Ebrahim Raisi headed a delegation to Jakarta, Indonesia on May 23, marking the first official visit of an Iranian president to Indonesia since 2006.[6] Raisi emphasized Iran's readiness to increase energy, oil and gas, and petrochemical cooperation with Indonesia during a meeting with reporters on May 22.[7] High-ranking Raisi administration and Indonesian officials separately signed 11 energy, pharmaceutical, petrochemical, and technology cooperation agreements in Jakarta on May 23.[8] Indonesia's location between the Indian and Pacific Oceans makes it an advantageous partner for Iran to transport oil to China, the main destination of Iranian oil exports.[9] Raisi's trip to Indonesia follows the conclusion of 15 cooperation agreements between Syria and Iran on May 3 and Russia's agreement to partially finance the construction of Iran's Rasht-Astara railway on May 17.[10]

Media reports discussing former Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Secretary Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani may reflect an intra-regime struggle over Shamkhani's future political trajectory. The UK-based outlet *Middle East Eye* reported that Shamkhani sought to finalize a nuclear agreement prior to his departure to boost his popularity as a future presidential candidate, citing hardline sources.[11] CTP cannot verify this report, and such claims should be viewed with skepticism. Hardline, Iran-based outlet *Kayhan* contrastingly claimed that Shamkhani opposed finalizing a nuclear deal as recently as 2020, which suggests it seeks to prevent spreading the impression that senior regime officials are enthusiastic about reviving the nuclear deal.[12] Shamkhani's experience as SNSC secretary positions him to run for high political office, as all former SNSC secretaries have previously done. Ali Larijani was the parliament speaker from 2008 to 2020 and Hassan Rouhani was Iran's president from 2013 to 2020. Not all SNSC secretaries have been successful, however. Saeed Jalili ran for president in 2013 and 2021 but was not elected.

[1] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-april-7-2023>

[2] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-april-7-2023>

[3] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/iran-update-april-21-2023>

- [4] <https://eyeofeufrates.com/ar/news/2023/05/24/8606>
- [5] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/iran-update-march-7-2023>
- [6] <https://www.farsnews.ir/news/14020302000356>
- [7] <https://president.ir/fa/144208>
- [8] <https://president.ir/fa/144238>
- [9] <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-ramps-up-oil-exports-as-china-pulls-ba...>
- [10] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-may-17-2023> ;
<https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-updates-may-3-2023>
- [11] <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iran-shamkhani-outgoing-security-chie...>
- [12] <https://t.co/puwiYIojPp>

Iran Update, May 25, 2023

Iran Update, May 25, 2023

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

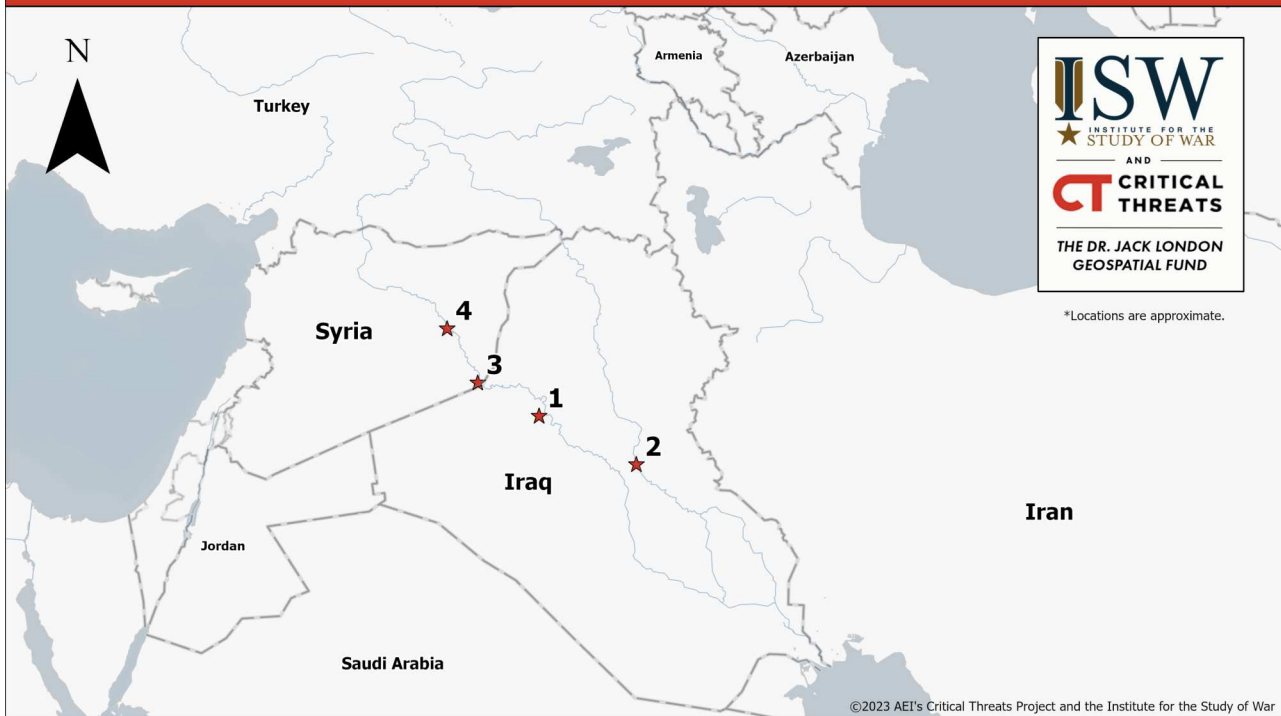
The Iran Update aims to inform national security policy by providing timely, relevant, and independent open-source analysis of developments pertaining to Iran and its Axis of Resistance. This update covers political, military, and economic events and trends that affect the stability and decision-making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

[Correction: A previous version of the text incorrectly stated the Popular Mobilization Forces' (PMF's) total budget would increase by about 458 billion USD. The correct text is that the PMF's total budget would increase by about 458 million USD. We have updated the text to fix this error.]

Key Takeaways

- 1. Axis of Resistance news sources coordinated a disinformation campaign that claimed the United States will establish a new base in Iraq, likely to reignite domestic US pressure on policymakers to withdraw forces from the Middle East.**
- 2. The Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) stands to gain a significant increase in funds from Iraq's 2023 budget, which very likely would position the group to improve its status as a parallel security institution in Iraq to state security forces.**
- 3. Syrian regime military security coordinated with the IRGC Quds Force in Albu Kamal to monitor civilians, which may advance Iranian efforts to secure the Albu Kamal-Deir ez Zor City land route in eastern Syria.**
- 4. An Iranian-backed militia leader stressed the need for secrecy around headquarters in Deir ez Zor City, likely to secure advanced weapons and IRGC Quds Force commanders from Israeli targeting.**

Iran Update | May 25, 2023



- 1). ANBAR - Axis of Resistance news sources coordinated a disinformation campaign that claimed the United States will establish a new base in Iraq, likely to reignite domestic US pressure on policymakers to withdraw forces from the Middle East.
- 2). BAGHDAD - The Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) stands to gain a significant increase in funds from Iraq's 2023 budget, which very likely would position the group to improve its status as a parallel security institution in Iraq to state security forces. More funding and personnel may embolden and enable the PMF to intervene in Iraqi elections and engage in sectarian violence.
- 3). ALBU KAMAL - Syrian regime military security coordinated with the IRGC Quds Force in Albu Kamal to monitor civilians, which may advance Iranian efforts to secure the Albu Kamal-Deir ez Zor City land route in eastern Syria.
- 4). DEIR EZ ZOR - An Iranian-backed militia leader stressed the need for secrecy around headquarters in Deir ez Zor City, likely to secure advanced weapons and IRGC Quds Force commanders from Israeli targeting.

Iranian Activities in the Levant

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

Axis of Resistance news sources coordinated a disinformation campaign that claimed the United States will establish a new base in Iraq, likely to reignite domestic US pressure on policymakers to withdraw forces from the Middle East. Lebanese Hezbollah-affiliated *Al Mayadeen English* reported that the US is planning to build a new military base in Anbar Province, Iraq on May 23, citing an unidentified "Iraqi security official." [1] CTP cannot verify this report, and such claims should be viewed with skepticism. Several Iranian state-affiliated media outlets circulated the *Al Mayadeen* report on their English-language sites, suggesting that the outlets coordinated with *Al Mayadeen* to target English-speaking audiences. [2] Iran and the Axis of Resistance have long sought the removal of US forces from the Middle East. US officials have not indicated that the United States will establish a new base in Anbar Province.

The Axis of Resistance disinformation campaign could elevate the risk of an attack against US interests or personnel in Iraq within the coming weeks. The report could renew attention to the US force presence in Iraq and inspire lower-level Iranian-proxies or unaffiliated militants to attack US forces. Iranian-backed militants previously threatened to attack US forces in Iraq on May 15 after US Ambassador to Iraq Alina Romanowski commented on US plans to remain in the Middle East, but did not follow through with the attack. [3] Iranian-backed Iraqi proxy channels, contrastingly, have not responded to or republished the Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah media claims about the rumored US base in Anbar Province. Few media sources have published the report, which suggests local militants were not the target audience.

An Iranian-backed militia leader stressed the need for secrecy around headquarters in Deir ez Zor City, likely to secure advanced weapons and IRGC Quds Force commanders from Israeli targeting. An IRGC-affiliated official discussed security measures at a local headquarters with unspecified Iranian-backed leaders in Deir ez Zor City on May 25.[4] He ordered the leaders not to restore buildings in the vicinity of headquarters across Deir ez Zor city to preserve the locations' secrecy.[5] Iranian-backed militias have previously repurposed civilian buildings into weapons depots in Deir ez Zor Province.[6] Greater operational security for headquarters in Deir ez Zor would provide security for IRGC Quds Force and Iranian-backed militants in Deir ez Zor and help Iran facilitate the transfer of advanced weapons systems into Syria. Iranian shipments of advanced air defense equipment and precision guided munitions that arrived in Syria through the Albu Kamal border crossing in Deir ez Zor Province were the targets of Israeli drone strikes in February and March, as CTP previously reported.[7]

CTP previously assessed that the weapon shipments Israel targeted in Syria may have carried air defense system components. CTP has not recorded any Israeli airstrikes in eastern Syria since March 22, after which the escalation cycle between Israel and Iran resulted in the death of a US contractor. Since then, Iranian-backed militias have continued to arrive from Iraq into Syria.[8] Iran also has transferred unsophisticated air defense weapons to Syria.[9] IRGC Quds Force leadership additionally directed several measures in Deir ez Zor Province since late March to ensure the operational security of the Albu Kamal-Deir ez Zor land route.[10] Iran's focus on operational security and shift to sending unsophisticated weapons to Syria suggests that Iran has taken an operational pause on bringing advanced weapons systems into Syria.

Syrian regime military security coordinated with the IRGC Quds Force in Albu Kamal to monitor civilians, which may advance Iranian efforts to secure the Albu Kamal-Deir ez Zor City land route in eastern Syria. Syrian state security official Abu Haidar and the Albu Kamal District IRGC Quds Force Commander agreed to establish a Syrian military security detachment in Albu Kamal city on May 25.[11] Syrian military security forces have previously coordinated with Iranian-backed militias to conduct counter-ISIS operations and arrest locals accused of leaking military information.[12] CTP has not previously observed such coordination in the vicinity of Albu Kamal, however. Syrian regime forces' coordination with Iran to monitor civilians indicates the regime is unable to challenge Iranian military development in Albu Kamal or that Iran needs regime forces to secure the area. Iranian securitization of the Al-Qaim-Albu Kamal border crossing and the land route to Deir ez Zor city enables the transfer of Iranian-backed militant personnel and military equipment, as CTP has previously reported.[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 and in future updates.

The Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) stands to gain a significant increase in funds from Iraq's 2023 budget, which very likely would position the group to improve its status as a parallel security institution in Iraq to state security forces. Iraq's 2023 draft budget nearly doubles the number of employees under the PMF from 122,000 to 238,075 employees.[14] The PMF's total budget would increase by about 458 million USD. The 2023 budget draft shows that the Ministry of Transportation, which is run by the Badr Organization's Fatah party, would more than triple its budget. The Ministry of Higher Education, which is run by Asaib Ahl al Haq's Sadiqoun party, would increase its budget by over 600 percent.[15] The PMF cultivates legitimacy within Iraqi communities by providing services that state run institutions may struggle to provide independently like social services and counter-ISIS operations.

More funding and personnel may embolden and enable the PMF to intervene in Iraqi elections and engage in sectarian violence. PMF militias were accused of intimidating and killing protesters and activists in the lead up to the 2021 elections.[16] Iraq's parliament recently passed a Shia Coordination Framework-backed election law that is expected to marginalize independent and

minority political parties in Iraq, as CTP previously reported.[17] An emboldened PMF may seek to manipulate or intimidate voters in key districts to help secure votes in favor of Coordination Framework parties. In addition, Badr Organization militants likely committed a series of targeted killings of Sunni civilians in Diyala Province between February and March 2023.[18] Badr Organization Secretary General Hadi al Ameri successfully pressured Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al Sudani to remove Iraqi Special Forces from the province who had been deployed in response to the Badr-committed violence ultimately gaining de facto control.[19]

Iran Update, May 26, 2023

Iran Update, May 26, 2023

Ashka Jhaveri, Amin Soltani, and Kitaneh Fitzpatrick

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

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Key Takeaways

1. Saudi media reported Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) is preparing to target US forces in Syria, which likely misrepresents the threat LH poses.
2. Iran has increasingly engaged in prisoner exchanges with Western countries in recent weeks, likely to signal its willingness to resume nuclear negotiations. Iran could be signaling its interest in nuclear diplomacy to preempt US or Israeli military action against its nuclear facilities.

Iranian Activities in the Levant

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

Saudi media reported Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) is preparing to target US forces in Syria, which likely misrepresents the threat LH poses. *Al Hadath Media* reported on May 24 that LH's special forces Golan Unit conducted a military exercise near Al Dumayr, Damascus in preparation to attack US forces in Syria.[1] *Al Hadath Media* reported the Golan Unit trained with tanks and medium arms, suggesting they would conduct a ground attack on US forces. Such an attack runs counter to the Golan Unit's covert objectives. The Golan Unit operates in the Golan Heights and not in the vicinity of US forces in Syria. *Al Hadath* correctly mentioned that Musa Ali Daqduq, who is a US Specially Designated Global Terrorist, heads the Golan Unit.[2] Daqduq planned numerous attacks against Coalition Forces in Iraq and was responsible for forming and arming militias loyal to Iran in Iraq, such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, which suggests he is responsible for proxy development rather than commanding mechanized forces.[3] Neither Iranian nor Iranian-affiliated media outlets have reported on the Golan Unit military exercise near Damascus. Iranian and LH media have covered similar exercises, however. Iranian and LH media extensively covered LH's recent military exercise in southern Lebanon on May 21.[4] US forces were able to defeat a Kremlin-affiliated Wagner Group mechanized ground attack in 2018, which demonstrates US capabilities to counter such an attack.[5]

Iranian Domestic Affairs

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

Iran has increasingly engaged in prisoner exchanges with Western countries in recent weeks, likely to signal its willingness to resume nuclear negotiations. Iran exchanged four prisoners with Belgium, France, and Ireland between May 12 to May 26, for the first time since 2019.[6] Iran previously engaged in prisoner exchanges with Western countries in 2016 and 2019 to encourage nuclear negotiations. Recent prisoner exchanges coincided with other recent acts that signal Iran's willingness to resume negotiations, including rhetorical messaging, diplomatic meetings, and pressure tactics.[7]

Iran could be signaling its interest in nuclear diplomacy to preempt US or Israeli military action against its nuclear facilities. *Axios* reported on May 17 that the US and Israel are discussing joint military planning for taking action against Iran's nuclear program.[8] Israel Defense Forces Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Herzi Halevi warned on May 23 that Israel would strike Iran's nuclear facilities.[9] Israeli National Security Advisor Tzachi Hanegbi separately stated that Israel is capable of attacking Iran's underground nuclear facilities on May 23.[10] Tehran has historically sought to prevent a consensus from emerging between the US and allies on taking military action against Iranian nuclear facilities.

Iran Update, May 30, 2023

Iran Update, May 30, 2023

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

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Key Takeaways

1. Israel Defense Forces (IDF) conducted airstrikes on at least two joint Syrian Arab Army-Lebanese Hezbollah positions in southwestern Syria on May 28, which is unlikely to prompt an Iranian-directed attack on US forces in Syria.

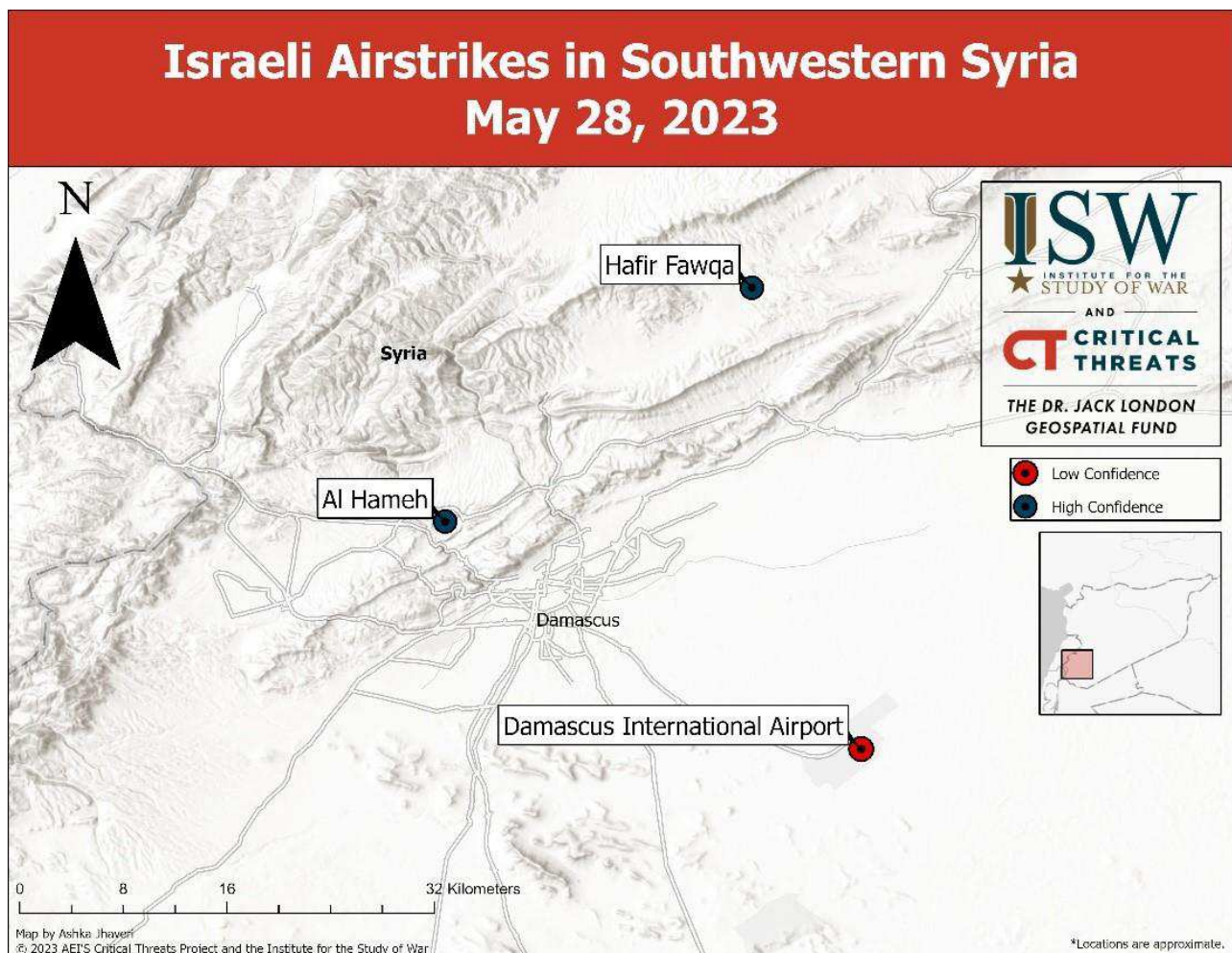
2. The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) is preparing to launch artillery into Iraqi Kurdistan, likely as part of a short-term military conflict against perceived Israeli threats from the Iraqi Kurdistan Region.

3. Iranian and Afghan border guards engaged in a brief and lethal clash near the Malik-Zaranj border crossing on May 27, which Iran is unlikely to escalate to a larger armed conflict.

Iranian Activities in the Levant

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

Israel Defense Forces (IDF) conducted airstrikes on at least two joint Syrian Arab Army-Lebanese Hezbollah positions in southwestern Syria on May 28, which is unlikely to prompt an Iranian-directed attack on US forces in Syria. The IDF targeted an LH-occupied air defense base in Hafir Al-Fawqa and a weapons storage facility in Hamiyeh, Damascus.[1] The Syrian Defense Ministry reported the airstrike targeted some points in the vicinity of Damascus and caused material damage.[2] Syrian opposition media reported that the IDF also targeted an unspecified location in the vicinity of the Damascus International Airport. Other sources did not report that the airport is out of service.[3] Iranian-backed militias attacked US forces in March after Israeli airstrikes killed IRGC personnel, which suggests that Iran directs attacks in response to the death Iranian military officers.[4] The May 28 airstrike did not result in the deaths of Iranian military personnel.



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 Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) is preparing to launch artillery into Iraqi Kurdistan, likely as part of a short-term military conflict against perceived Israeli threats from the Iraqi Kurdistan Region. Kurdish human rights organization *Hengaw* circulated videos of Iranian forces transporting artillery and military equipment to Iran's northwest border with Iraq from Mahabad, West Azerbaijan Province and Javanroud, Kermanshah Province on May 30. [5] The movement of materiel follows threats from senior IRGC Ground Forces commanders and security officials about confronting anti-regime actors and "terrorists" along Iran's western border with Iraq in recent weeks. [6] Iranian officials routinely use the term to refer to Kurdish separatist groups in Iraqi Kurdistan. Iranian authorities also claimed to have dismantled "terrorist" cells linked to Israel in northwestern Iran on May 21 and 29, which suggests that Iran is deploying artillery because it perceives a threat from Israel in Iraqi Kurdistan. [7] Iran is not signaling a willingness to engage in a long-term conflict with Iraq to permanently eradicate these perceived threats, however.

Regime officials have historically accused anti-regime militant groups and Israel of using Iraqi Kurdistan to facilitate operations into Iran. [8] For example, Iranian media accused Kurdish opposition groups of helping Israel smuggle military equipment into Iran that Israel used in its January 28 drone attack on a munitions factory in Esfahan. [9] Iran also previously attacked Iraqi Kurdistan to counter perceived threats in this region. [10] Iran attacked Kurdish opposition groups in November 2022 for allegedly supporting Mahsa Amini protesters. [11]

Iranian Domestic Affairs

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

Iranian and Afghan border guards engaged in a brief and lethal clash near the Malik-Zaranj border crossing on May 27, which Iran is unlikely to escalate to a larger armed conflict. The clash was the first violent border incident between the two countries since July 31, 2022 and it resulted in the death of two Iranian border guards and one Taliban fighter. [12] Social media users reported that Iran was constructing a defensive outpost which Taliban border guards tried to halt, leading to the clash. [13] The May 27 border clash coincides with a rhetorical escalation between Iran and the Taliban over Iran's water rights to the Helmand River, an Afghan river that flows across the border into Iran. [14] Some Iranian officials have downplayed the incident in recent days, emphasizing that the situation is now under control. [15] A larger armed conflict would risk destabilizing Afghanistan, likely leading to an influx of Afghan refugees and drugs into Iran.

The Taliban is unlikely to accede to Iran's demands. Afghanistan is experiencing a drought, which is driving a zero-sum competition with Iran for shared water resources. [16] Senior Taliban leaders denied Iran's request for more water and claimed they cannot release any more water due to drought. [17] The Taliban is attempting to increase the amount of water available to local farmers by building a new dam in western Afghanistan. [18] Water shortages are one of the drivers of anti-regime protests in Iran. [19]

In a most dangerous scenario, Iran could escalate against the Taliban by conducting covert action against water infrastructure in Afghanistan, likely exacerbating instability in Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan. This scenario is plausible because Iran supported attacks on dams in Afghanistan during the Taliban insurgency. [20] Iran could use the Fatemiyoun Division, its Afghan Shi'a proxy militia, to conduct similar attacks. [21] The Taliban possibly would retaliate against Iran-orchestrated attacks by harboring and supporting Balochi rebels which could exacerbate ongoing Balochi insurgencies in both Iran and Pakistan. [22] The Taliban foreign minister expressed support for Iranian Balochi dissidents on May 22, which implies a threat toward Iran. [23]

Iran Update, May 31, 2023

Iran Update, May 31, 2023

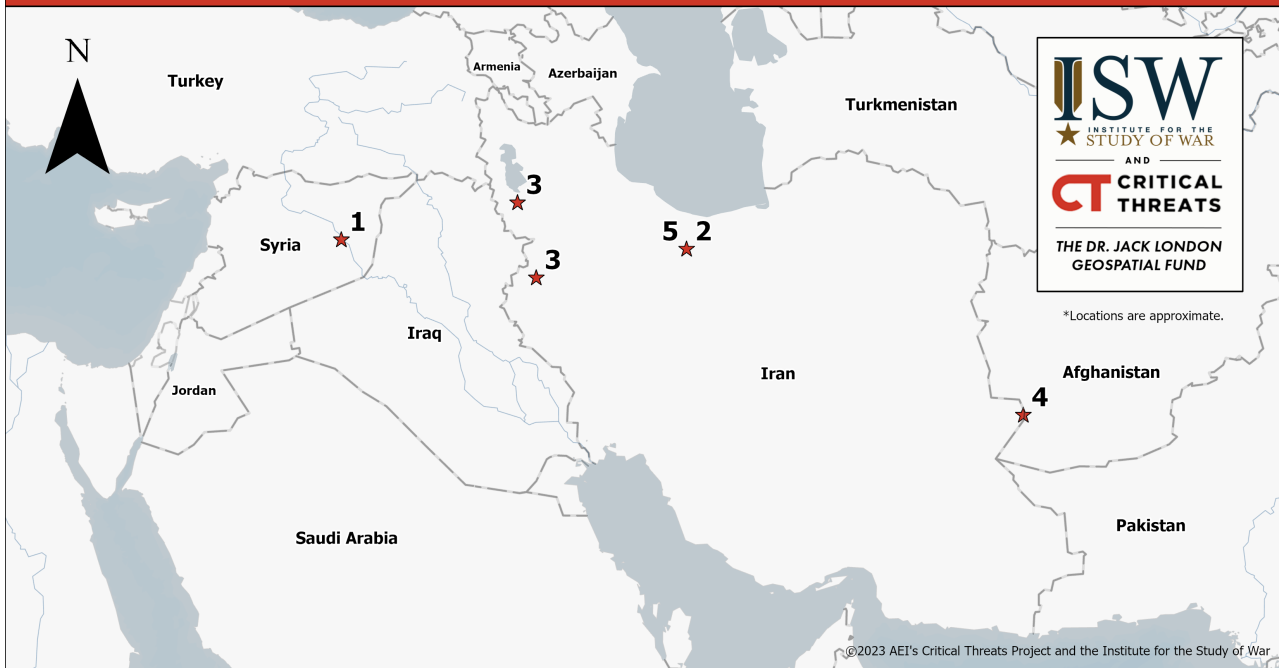
Andie Parry, Amin Soltani, Annika Ganzeveld, Johanna Moore, Ashka Jhaveri, Peter Mills, and Kitaneh Fitzpatrick

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Key Takeaways

1. Iran has bolstered its defensive position in eastern Syria since the end of the escalation cycle that occurred in March, likely to facilitate the transfer of advanced conventional weapons into Syria. The escalation cycle between Iran, Israel and the United States may have prompted Iran to halt transferring advanced conventional weapons through Deir ez Zor.
2. The Raisi administration is reconfiguring personnel to economically benefit from Iranian and Syrian reintegration into the region.
3. Iran is likely attempting to coerce Iraq into complying with Iranian security concerns about Israeli activities in Iraqi Kurdistan.
4. Iran and the Taliban are signaling they seek to avoid further border clashes over water disputes while preparing for further border clashes.
5. The Iranian Parliament approved Reza Morad Sahraei as Iran's new education minister on May 30, which could lead to intensified government indoctrination efforts and crackdowns on university student protests.

Iran Update | May 31, 2023



- 1). DEIR EZ ZOR - Iran has bolstered its defensive position in eastern Syria since the end of the escalation cycle that occurred in March, likely to facilitate the transfer of advanced conventional weapons into Syria. The escalation cycle between Iran, Israel and the United States may have prompted Iran to halt transferring advanced conventional weapons through Deir ez Zor.
- 2). TEHRAN - The Raisi administration is reconfiguring personnel to economically benefit from Iranian and Syrian reintegration into the region.
- 3). JAVANROUD and MAHABAD- Iran is likely attempting to coerce Iraq into complying with Iranian security concerns about Israeli activities in Iraqi Kurdistan.
- 4). MILAK - Iran and the Taliban are signaling they seek to avoid further border clashes over water disputes while preparing for further border clashes.
- 5). TEHRAN - The Iranian Parliament approved Reza Morad Sahraei as Iran's new education minister on May 30, which could lead to intensified government indoctrination efforts and crackdowns on university student protests.

Iranian Activities in the Levant

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

Iran has bolstered its defensive position in eastern Syria since the end of the escalation cycle that occurred in March, likely to facilitate the transfer of advanced conventional weapons into Syria. Iranian shipments of advanced air defense equipment and precision guided munitions that arrived in Syria through the Abu Kamal border crossing in Deir ez Zor Province were the targets of Israeli drone strikes in February and March, as CTP previously reported.[1] Iran has been transferring conventional air defense weapons to eastern Syria, training forces in Syria to use the weapons, and improving operational security in Deir ez Zor Province since mid-March. Israel has not conducted drone strikes in eastern Syria since March 23.

Iran has transferred conventional air defense weaponry suitable for countering drone attacks to Deir ez Zor Province. CTP previously reported that Iranian-backed militias distributed over 140 Misagh-1 man-portable defense missiles (MANPADS) to Fatemiyoun and Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH) militants in Abu Kamal and Al Mayadeen, Deir ez Zor Province on April 11.[2] [3] Several Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces units, including KH subsequently reinforced positions between al Hari and al Suwayya, Abu Kamal, Syria along the Iranian-backed, militia-controlled border crossing with 12.7 caliber anti-aircraft machine guns on May 23. [4] MANPADs and anti-aircraft machine guns are suitable for use against drones.[5]

Iran and Iranian-backed militias have trained forces in eastern Syria to operate conventional air defense weapons. Local anti-Iranian media outlet *Eye of Euphrates* reported that approximately 25 Iranian missile and air defense specialists arrived in Abu Kamal, Deir ez Zor Province on April

4. [6] The IRGC Quds Force also deployed 40 Iranian “military trainers” across five Syrian provinces between April 17 and 19.[7] The *Euphrates Post* reported on April 20 that a Lebanese Hezbollah commander trained Iranian-backed militants in operating Misagh-1 MANPADS in the vicinity of Al Mayadeen, Deir ez Zor Province.

Iran also has taken steps to enhance operational security between the Albu Kamal border crossing and Deir ez Zor since mid-March. An unspecified Iranian-backed militia arrested and replaced at least 46 Syrian militants suspected of leaking sensitive information on March 14.[8] IRGC Quds Force leadership in Albu Kamal City also emphasized maintaining operational security in a May 4 meeting with local militia leaders.[9] Leaks from Syrian militia members may have damaged operational security and left Iranian convoys vulnerable to targeted attacks from ISIS or Israeli airstrikes, as CTP previously assessed.[10] Iranian backed militias also have improved security along shipment routes in Deir ez Zor Province. Lebanese Hezbollah and other Iranian-backed militias were identified installing surveillance at a new Iranian headquarters in Albu Kamal on April 19 and at a weapons depot in al Mayadeen, Deir ez Zor Province on May 31.[11] Iranian leadership in Deir ez Zor Province replaced local forces with Kataib Hezbollah militants on April 25 to fortify Iranian-affiliated headquarters and weapons depots in al Mayadeen. [12]

The escalation cycle between Iran, Israel and the United States may have prompted Iran to halt transferring advanced conventional weapons through Deir ez Zor. An Israeli drone strike in Deir ez Zor City on March 8 resulted in the death of an IRGC QF officer.[13] Iran launched rockets at US forces at Green Village on March 13, possibly in response to the March 8 strike. [14] A subsequent Israeli drone strike killed an IRGC QF officer in the vicinity of Albu Kamal on March 22.[15] The Iranian-backed militia Liwa al Ghaliboun launched a drone strike against a US base in Hasakah, Syria, on March 23, which resulted in the death of a US contractor.[16] The United States retaliated with strikes against at least four Iranian-backed militia positions on March 23.[17] Iranian-backed militias launched rockets at US forces at the Conoco Mission Support Site and Green Village on March 24.[18] The United States responded on the same day by striking the Ayyash Warehouse outside Deir ez Zor City. CTP has not observed an Israeli airstrike on Iranian convoys, personnel, or infrastructure in eastern Syria since March 22.[19] The timing suggests that the US strikes on Iranian-backed militias was decisive in changing Iran’s decision-making calculus regarding escalation in Syria. The escalation cycle culminated, before Israel raided the al Aqsa Mosque on April 4.[20]

Iranian Activities in Iraq

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Iran is likely attempting to coerce Iraq into complying with Iranian security concerns about Israeli activities in Iraqi Kurdistan. Iranian Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi met with his Iraqi counterpart Abdul Amir al Shammari to discuss border security on May 31, which suggests that Iran deployed artillery to the Iraqi border on May 30 to pressure the Iraqi government to accede to Iranian demands in subsequent negotiations.[21] CTP previously assessed that the IRGC was preparing to launch artillery into Iraqi Kurdistan, likely as part of a short-term military conflict against perceived Israeli threats from the Iraqi Kurdistan Region.[22] The deployment of artillery indicates Iran’s willingness to resort to military action if diplomatic engagements do not lead to the eradication of perceived Israeli activities in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Iranian Domestic Affairs

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

The Raisi administration is reconfiguring personnel to economically benefit from Iranian and Syrian reintegration into the region. The Raisi administration plans to reestablish the Commerce

Ministry, which was dissolved in 2011, following parliamentary approval.[23] The Commerce Ministry will supplant the Industry, Mines, and Trade Ministry's domestic regulatory obligations, allowing the latter ministry to focus on foreign trade. Raisi also nominated an IRGC-affiliated and former parastatal industry executive, Abbas Ali Abadi, to become Industry, Mines, and Trade Minister on May 30. The official posts Abadi held signals the Raisi administration's focus on regional economic interests.[24] Abbas Abadi serves as the CEO of MAPNA Group, a conglomerate that has a significant presence in the Iranian economy. He also managed several IRGC-affiliated parastatal economic organizations between 2008 and 2023. Abbas Abadi presided over several investment and construction projects in Iraq and Syria throughout his career, which indicates he has the relevant experience and networks needed to reinforce Raisi's ongoing regional economic objectives. The Raisi administration signed numerous economic cooperation agreements with the Assad regime since May 3 to capitalize on Syria and Iran's recent normalization of relations with the Arab League and Saudi Arabia.[25] Abadi, Raisi's proposed Industry, Mines, and Trade Minister, may separately leverage his economic experience in Syria and Iraq to help launder potential Arab and Gulf state financing in Syria through proxy economic organizations in Iraq.

Abadi's professional history also indicates that he will likely protect the IRGC's economic interests and further pursue his predecessor's corrupt path, which could increase political pressure on the Raisi administration. Abadi has not only managed IRGC-affiliated parastatal organizations but has also managed Iran Khodro – the country's largest car manufacturing company – and belongs to the Astan Quds Razavi (AQR) network - a state-controlled charity with a history of economic corruption. Abadi's predecessor, former Industry, Mines, and Trade Minister Reza Fatemi Amin, also belonged to the AQR network and was accused of protecting the interests of automobile manufacturers, leading to his parliamentary impeachment and removal from office on April 30.[26]

The Iranian Parliament approved Reza Morad Sahraei as Iran's new education minister on May 30, which could lead to intensified government indoctrination efforts and crackdowns on university student protests.[27] Sahraei served as the president of Farhangian University—a state-affiliated teacher training university—prior to becoming education minister and has extensive experience in authoring textbooks.[28] Sahraei may advance the regime's effort to indoctrinate students by revising textbook content, which Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei previously called for on May 2.[29]

Sahraei additionally supports the regime's hardline stance on women's issues, which suggests that he will facilitate the suppression of anti-regime activity among Iranian university students. Sahraei warned Farhangian University students and professors during the Mahsa Amini movement that individuals who opposed the regime “have no place in Farhangian University.”[30] Sahraei separately supported gender segregation as a student at Allameh Tabatabai University in 2012. [31] University students largely spearheaded the Mahsa Amini movement between September 2022 and January 2023.[32]

Iran and the Taliban are signaling they seek to avoid further border clashes over water disputes while preparing for further border clashes. Iranian and Afghan border guards engaged in a brief and lethal clash near the Milak-Zaranj border crossing on May 27, as CTP previously reported.[33] Local Taliban officials denied reports of border tensions and claimed the situation near Islam Qala was calm on May 30.[34] Iranian and Taliban officials employed de-escalatory rhetoric on May 31, emphasizing border clashes were under control.[35]

Reports of Iranian and Taliban military movement in the vicinity of the border, if accurate, indicate decreased Iranian confidence in a deescalation cycle, however. The Taliban's 209th Corps deployed approximately battalion-sized reinforcements, including armored vehicles and artillery, near the border with Iran by Islam Qala, Herat Province on May 31.[36] Social media reports separately suggested that Iran amassed troops near the Dogharun-Islam Qala border crossing on May 31. [37]

[1] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-april-7-2023>

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[4] <https://eyeofeuphrates.com/ar/news/2023/05/24/8606>

[5] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/iran-update-march-7-2023>

[6] <https://eyeofeuphrates.com/ar/news/2023/04/05/8153>

[7] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/iran-update-april-21-2023>

[8] <https://www.syriahr.com/%d8%a8%d8%b9%d8%af-%d8%b3%d8%a7%d8%b9%d8%a...> ;

<https://www.syriahr.com/%d8%a8%d9%80-%d9%80%d8%aa%d9%80-%d9%80%d9%...>

[9] <https://eyeofeuphrates.com/ar/news/2023/05/31/8688>

[10] <https://www.syriahr.com/%d8%a8%d8%b9%d8%af-%d8%b3%d8%a7%d8%b9%d8%a7%d8%aa-%d9%85%d9%86-%d8%aa%d8%ad%d9%82%d9%8a%d9%82%d8%a7%d8%aa-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%85%d8%b1%d8%b5%d8%af-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b3%d9%88%d8%b1%d9%8a-%d8%ad%d9%88%d9%84/593744/> ; <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/iran-update-march-22-2023>

[11] <https://eyeofeuphrates.com/ar/news/2023/05/31/8683> ;
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[12] <https://eyeofeuphrates.com/ar/news/2023/04/26/8322>

[14] <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/...> ;
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<https://twitter.com/CENTCOM/status/1639330061797949444> ;
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- [25] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-april-28-2023> ; <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-updates-may-3-2023> ; <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-updates-may-4-2023> ; <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-may-8-2023>
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