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IRAN UPDATE, SEPTEMBER 1, 2023

Iran Update, September 1, 2023

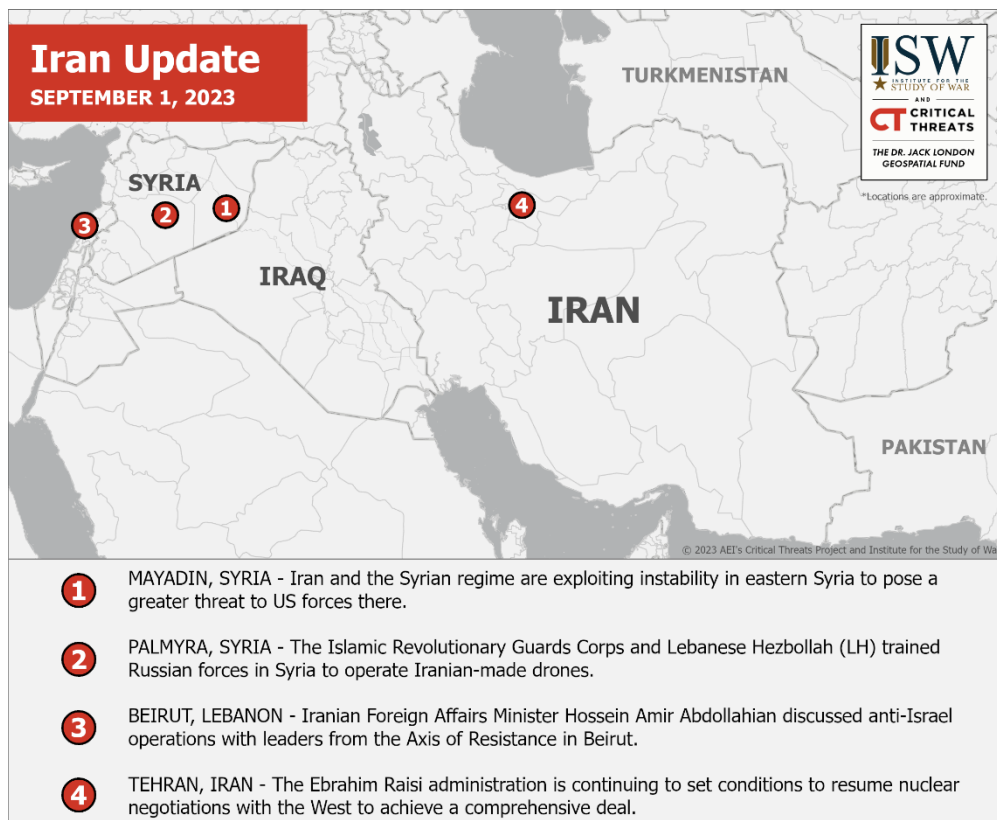
Ashka Jhaveri, Annika Ganzeveld, Amin Soltani, and Nicholas Carl

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

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

Key Takeaways

1. Iran and the Syrian regime are exploiting instability in eastern Syria to pose a greater threat to US forces there.
2. The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) trained Russian forces in Syria to operate Iranian-made drones.
3. Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian discussed anti-Israel operations with leaders from the Axis of Resistance in Beirut.
4. The Ebrahim Raisi administration is continuing to set conditions to resume nuclear negotiations with the West to achieve a comprehensive deal.



Iranian Activities in the Levant

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

Iran and the Syrian regime are exploiting instability in eastern Syria to pose a greater threat to US forces there. Intense fighting between local tribes and the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) has erupted and escalated significantly since August 27.[1] Iran and the Syrian regime are using the current security situation to create an increasingly hostile operating environment for US forces, which is consistent with their campaign to expel the United States from Syria.[2]

- The SDF arrested Ahmed Abu Khawla—the Deir ez Zor Military Council (DMC) commander—on August 27 and began moving reinforcements into Deir ez Zor Province on the same day.[3] The arrest spurred major clashes between the SDF and DMC as well as local tribes. Both sides have suffered dozens of casualties in the fighting, making these clashes deadlier and more significant than the previous SDF-DMC fighting in July 2023.
- Iranian-backed militias deployed short- and medium-range rockets along the Euphrates River in Mayadin City according to an August 31 report.[4] Rocket launcher experts from Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon deployed to the location of the rocket launchers.[5] Local Syrian opposition media reported that the militias are preparing to attack US forces stationed nearby at the Green Village and Mission Support Site Conoco and blame the attack on tribesmen clashing with the SDF.[6] Iranian-backed forces have previously conducted rocket attacks on US forces in Deir ez Zor Province in 2023.[7]
- CTP previously reported that pro-Syrian regime forces, including Iranian-backed militants, are deploying to SDF-controlled territory to conduct assassinations and sabotage and fuel tribal tensions. Syrian Air Force intelligence, for instance, deployed to Dhiban in SDF-held territory on August 31.[8] Tribal forces and the SDF have been fighting over Dhiban for several days using drones, mortars, and small arms.[9] The SDF separately arrested Iranian-affiliated forces on August 31 for intimidating locals across the river from Deir ez Zor City.[10]
- Pro-regime forces, including Iranian-backed elements, are trying to give local tribes medical aid and weapons, which could sustain further fighting. Iranian-backed militias offered medical treatment to

injured tribesmen affiliated with the tribal forces fighting the SDF.[11] Syrian regime forces are sending weapons into SDF-held territory through several river crossings as well.[12]

The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) trained Russian forces in Syria to operate Iranian-made drones on August 31. The Russian forces trained on the Ababil-3 multirole and Qasef-1 combat drones at the Palmyra Military Airport in Central Syria, where Iranian-backed militias and Russian forces are stationed.[13] Local Syrian opposition media reported that the Russian forces have a special site for LH Unit 127—a drone production and intelligence collection unit—to assemble, test, and train forces on drones.[14] The IRGC could have used this opportunity to showcase Iranian drones to Russian officers, as the Kremlin continues to seek Iranian-made drones for use in Ukraine. ISW previously assessed that Russia seeks to retain Iran as a long-term strategic defense partner.[15] Russian forces could use the drones to offset their force reduction in Syria since the invasion of Ukraine. Russia is periodically engaged in conflict with rebels in northwestern Syria, such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the jihadist group that controls the territory.[16] Russia employs Iranian-made drones, notably the Shahed-131- and 136 drones for striking rear areas in Ukraine.[17] The Qasef-1 has a range of 150 kilometers, and Russian forces could use it to strike areas along the front line, given their frequent use of ZALA Lancet and FPV drones.[18]

Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian discussed anti-Israel operations with leaders from the Axis of Resistance in Beirut on September 1. Abdollahian met with Lebanese Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) Secretary General Ziyad al Nakhalah, and Hamas Political Bureau Deputy Chairman Saleh al Arouri.[19] Abdollahian reiterated common Iranian talking points during the meetings, calling for unity among Palestinian militias and expressing support for militancy in the West Bank. Abdollahian's visit to Beirut comes amid a spike in inflammatory rhetoric between Israeli and Palestinian militant officials.[20] Abdollahian's rhetoric is consistent with the messaging from other Iranian leaders in recent months. Senior Iranian officials, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, have regularly called for further arming Palestinian militias in the West Bank since August 2022.[21] Khamenei also called for unity among Palestinian militias and strengthening militancy in the West Bank in meetings with senior Hamas and PIJ officials in Tehran in June 2023.[22]

Iranian Domestic and Political Affairs

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

The Ebrahim Raisi administration is continuing to set conditions to resume nuclear negotiations with the West to achieve a comprehensive deal. Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian announced on September 1 that Oman will facilitate nuclear negotiations.[23] These remarks follow several Raisi administration officials, including President Raisi, indicating that they will pursue negotiations on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly that begins in New York City on September 5.[24] Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei endorsed such negotiations during a meeting with Raisi administration officials on August 30, as CTP previously reported.[25] Future negotiations between Iran and the West would follow Iran and the United States reaching a prisoner-exchange agreement on August 10, as part of a broader understanding between both parties.[26] The United States and Iran previously reached a confidence-building interim agreement in 2013 to facilitate further the negotiations that would yield the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in 2015.[27]

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[2] <https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/iran-russia-and-syrian-regime-...>

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[13] <https://eyeofeufrates.com/ar/news/2023/08/31/9558>

[14] <https://eyeofeufrates.com/ar/news/2023/04/18/8257>; <https://twitter.com/IntelliTimes/status/1605902715862892544>

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[16] <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20230823-russian-air-strikes-in-...>

[17] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/irans-drone-inventory-and-poten...> <https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-ass...>

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IRAN UPDATE, SEPTEMBER 5, 2023

Iran Update, September 5, 2023

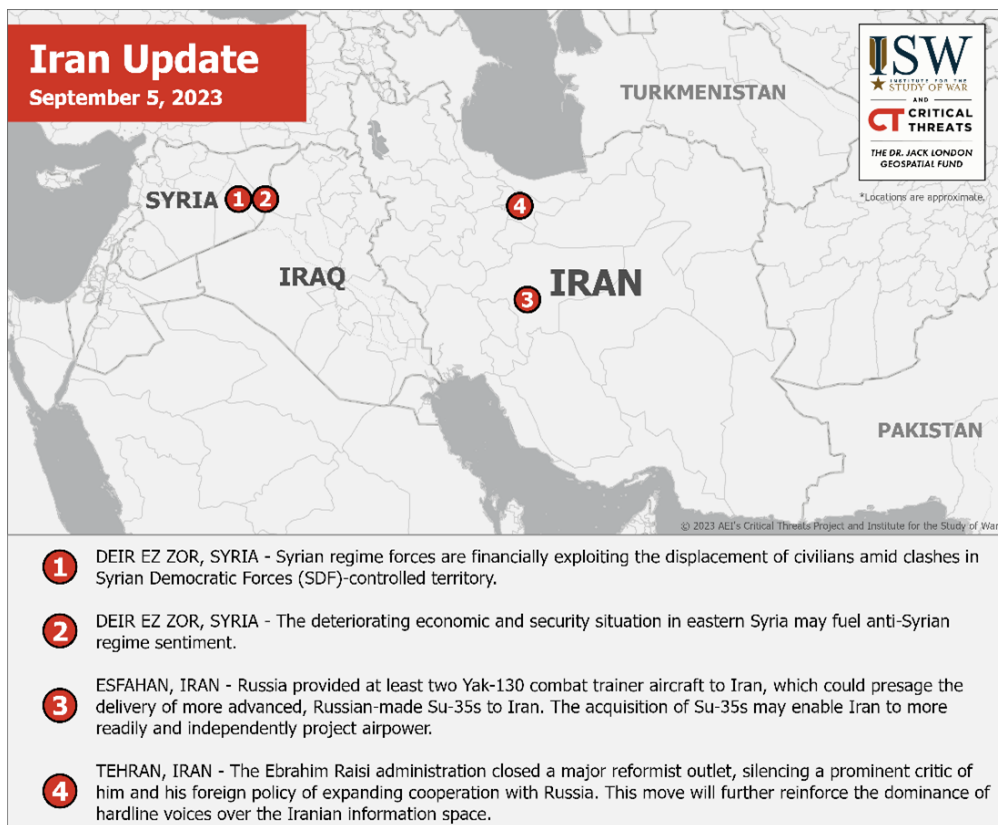
Ashka Jhaveri, Annika Ganzeveld, and Nicholas Carl

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Key Takeaways

1. Syrian regime forces are financially exploiting the displacement of civilians amid clashes in Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)-controlled territory.
2. The deteriorating economic and security situation in eastern Syria may fuel anti-Syrian regime sentiment.
3. Russia provided at least two Yak-130 combat trainer aircraft to Iran, which could presage the delivery of more advanced, Russian-made Su-35s to Iran. The acquisition of Su-35s may enable Iran to more readily and independently project air power.
4. The Ebrahim Raisi administration closed a major reformist outlet, silencing a prominent critic of him and his foreign policy of expanding cooperation with Russia. This move will further reinforce the dominance of hardline voices over the Iranian information space.



Iranian Activities in the Levant

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

Syrian regime forces are financially exploiting the displacement of civilians amid clashes in Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)-controlled territory. Clashes between the US-backed SDF and local tribal forces have continued in eastern Syria as of September 5, generating significant internal displacement. Local Syrian opposition media reported that the regime is taking advantage of the numerous civilians fleeing to regime-controlled territory amid these clashes, such as by imposing royalties on civilians trying to fly out of Deir ez Zor City airport.[1] They have prevented civilians from SDF-controlled territory from using the airport unless they pay "huge sums of money," according to these reports.[2] Regime forces have also charged families for ground transportation to Damascus and within eastern Syria.[3] This activity is consistent with the long-standing trend of regime forces extorting civilians for financial gain and to fund further military activities.[4]

The deteriorating economic and security situation in eastern Syria may fuel anti-Syrian regime sentiment. The ongoing clashes between the SDF and local tribal forces have disrupted fuel smuggling in the area, which has caused fuel prices in regime-controlled territory to rise significantly in recent days. The price of a liter of diesel has risen from 3,000 Syrian pounds to 8,000.[5] These reports are consistent with other reports that the regime is concerned that the clashes could exacerbate the already poor economic conditions in Syria.[6] The rising price of fuel comes as anti-regime protests have fluctuated throughout Syria due to economic grievances since mid-August 2023[7] Syrian President Bashar al Assad rising bus and fuel prices on August 15 was the initial catalyst for this protest wave.[8]

Iranian Domestic and Political Affairs

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

Russia provided at least two Yak-130 combat trainer aircraft to Iran on September 2, which could presage the delivery of more advanced, Russian-made Su-35s to Iran.^[9] The Yak-130 is a light combat and training aircraft that is capable of carrying various kinds of guided and unguided munitions.^[10] The aircraft arrived at the Shahid Babaei Air Base in Esfahan Province. The Artesh Air Force announced that the aircraft are primarily meant to train Iranian pilots to operate fourth- and fifth-generation fighter jets.^[11] Iranian state media framed the acquisition of Yak-130s as a “necessary prelude” to obtaining Su-35s.^[12] Western media separately speculated that Russia may have supplied the Yak-130s to Iran because Iranian-made aircraft cannot sufficiently train pilots on operating Su-35s.^[13] This military exchange is part of the deepening Russo-Iranian military and security relationship that CTP has covered extensively. The expansion of these ties accelerated especially after Iran began providing military support to Russia for its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

The acquisition of Russian Su-35s may enable Iran to more readily and independently project air power. Iran requested Russian intervention in 2015 in the Syrian civil war to help defend the Bashar al Assad regime. Iran lacked a modern air force capable of supporting its military operations in Syria and instead benefited from Russian air power.^[14] Russia has militarily deprioritized Syria since it invaded Ukraine, leaving Iran with less military air support in Syria. Obtaining Su-35s would help Iran build a modern air force for use in theaters abroad, such as in Syria.^[15]

The Ebrahim Raisi administration closed a major reformist outlet on September 4, silencing a prominent critic of him and his foreign policy of expanding cooperation with Russia. The Press Supervisory Board, which operates under the Culture and Islamic Guidance Ministry, shut down reformist-affiliated *Entekhab News* for publishing on August 22 a video criticizing Raisi’s “eastern- and Russia-oriented” foreign policy.^[16] The Board accused *Entekhab* of publishing material “contrary to Iranian national interests.” CTP has extensively covered the Raisi administration’s efforts to increase economic, energy, and security cooperation with China and Russia in recent months.^[17] Closing *Entekhab* will further reinforce the dominance of hardline voices over the Iranian information space. *Entekhab* served as a platform through which pro-regime moderates and reformists could criticize government economic and social policies.^[18] This closure is especially noteworthy in the lead-up to the one-year anniversary of Mahsa Amini’s killing on September 16 and the parliamentary elections in March 2024. The closure is also part of a broader effort by Raisi to silence reformist media. The Press Supervisory Board previously shut down reformist-affiliated *Sazandegi Newspaper* in February 2023 for lamenting Iran’s poor economic conditions.^[19]

[1] <https://eyeofeuphrates.com/ar/news/2023/09/04/9593> ; <https://eyeofeuphrates.com/ar/news/2023/09/05/9599>

[2] <https://eyeofeuphrates.com/ar/news/2023/09/05/9599>

[3] <https://eyeofeuphrates.com/ar/news/2023/09/04/9593>

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[15] <https://www.forbes.com/sites/pauliddon/2023/02/22/how-irans-acquisition-...>

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- [17] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-june-27-2023> ;
<https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-august-16-2023>
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<https://www.entekhab.ir/fa/news/737819>
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IRAN UPDATE, SEPTEMBER 6, 2023

Iran Update, September 6, 2023

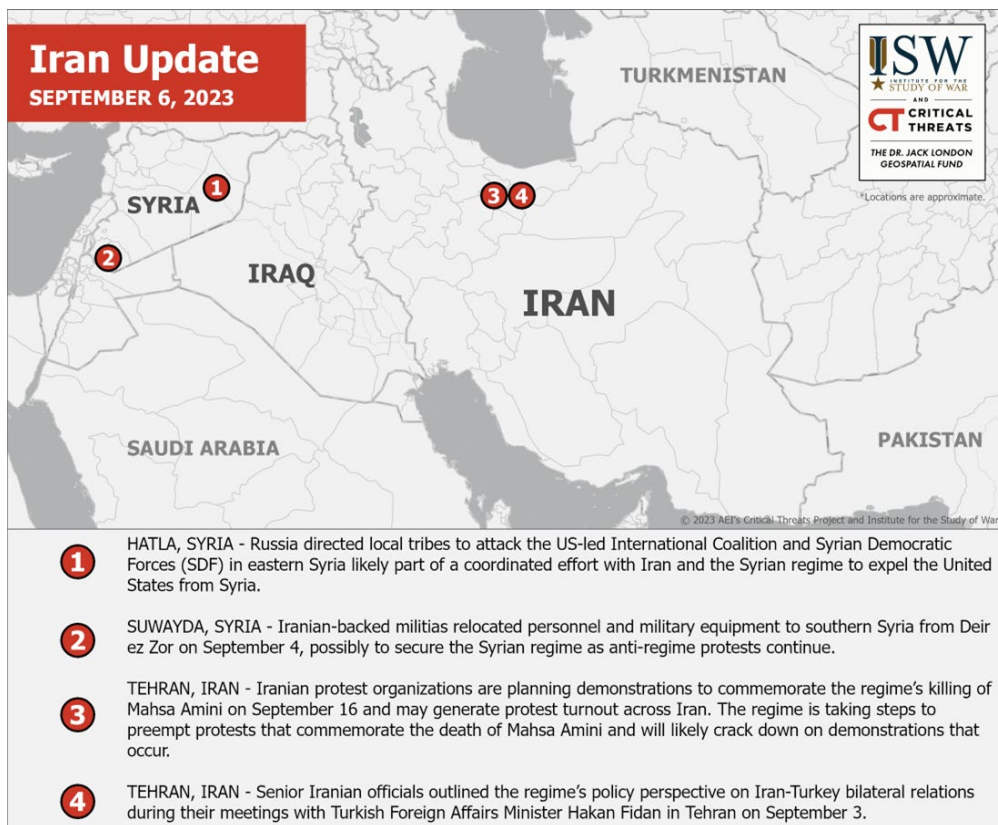
Ashka Jhaveri, Amin Soltani, Annika Ganzeveld, and Andie Parry

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Key Takeaways

1. Russia directed local tribes to attack the US-led International Coalition and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in eastern Syria likely part of a coordinated effort with Iran and the Syrian regime to expel the United States from Syria.
2. Iranian-backed militias relocated personnel and military equipment to southern Syria from Deir ez Zor on September 4, possibly to secure the Syrian regime as anti-regime protests continue.
3. Iranian protest organizations are planning demonstrations to commemorate the regime's killing of Mahsa Amini on September 16 and may generate protest turnout across Iran. The regime is taking steps to preempt protests that commemorate the death of Mahsa Amini and will likely crack down on demonstrations that occur.
4. Senior Iranian officials outlined the regime's policy perspective on Iran-Turkey bilateral relations during their meetings with Turkish Foreign Affairs Minister Hakan Fidan in Tehran on September 3.



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Russia directed local tribes to attack the US-led International Coalition and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in eastern Syria likely part of a coordinated effort with Iran and the Syrian regime to expel the United States from Syria.[1] Arab tribes in Deir ez Zor Province have been clashing with the US-backed SDF since August 17 in response to long-running local grievances against the SDF.[2] Deputy Commander of Russian Forces in Syria General Igor Smoly met with a local pro-regime sheikh and an Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Quds Force-affiliated sheikh in Hatla near Deir ez Zor City on September 2.[3] The attendees directed Arab tribal leaders at the meeting to attack the US-led International Coalition for its sponsorship of the SDF.[4] Iran, Russia, and Syria tried to provoke animosity within the local population against the United States in July and August 2023 to motivate them to attack US and SDF forces. Cultivating an anti-US grassroots resistance movement is one component of the coordinated campaign to expel the United States from Syria that CTP and ISW have been tracking since June 2023.[5] CTP previously reported that Iran and the Syrian regime are using the current security situation to create an increasingly hostile operating environment for US forces in eastern Syria.[6]

Iranian-backed militias relocated personnel and military equipment to southern Syria from Deir ez Zor on September 4, possibly to secure the Syrian regime as anti-regime protests continue.[7] Suwayda Province in southern Syria has become the well-organized center of the anti-regime protest movement as organizers demonstrate greater ability to direct and sustain constant demonstrations and issue new demands. [8] CTP previously reported that Iran sent Afghan, Iranian, and Iraqi snipers to Damascus from Iraq on August 27 and 31, possibly to quash potential protests.[9] Iran has a long history of using violence to impose social control.[10]

The more recent deployment demonstrates the priority Iran has given to securing the Syrian regime relative to its campaign to expel the United States from Syria. The personnel and equipment arrived in Deir ez Zor Province in July 2023 following rumors of a US-led International Coalition attack into regime-held territory,

according to local Syrian opposition media. Iran gave priority to military reinforcements to eastern Syria throughout July and August 2023 while framing the United States as an imminent threat to locals.[11] The massive deployment of forces to the area reinforced that narrative and was consistent with cultivating an anti-US grassroots resistance movement.[12] Iran is currently taking advantage of clashes between the Arab tribes in eastern Syria and the US-backed SDF to create a hostile environment for US forces, as CTP previously assessed.[13]

Iranian Domestic and Political Affairs

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Iranian protest organizations are planning demonstrations to commemorate the regime's killing of Mahsa Amini on September 16 and may generate protest turnout across Iran. The organizations are based in various Iranian cities and have called for protests on September 16.[14] They have not provided times or locations for the demonstrations, however. The organizations have also published videos with safety tips for protesters and promoted creative ways to spread the word about protests, such as by writing protest information on paper currency.[15] The organizations have demonstrated a low level of coordination by republishing each other's content and using similar protest slogans on social media. CTP previously reported that other demographics—such as Iranian students—are also planning protests.[16]

The regime is taking steps to preempt protests that commemorate the death of Mahsa Amini and will likely crack down on demonstrations that occur. It has arrested numerous women's rights activists and family members of protesters killed during last year's Mahsa Amini movement.[17] The regime has additionally intensified its crackdown on dissident voices in universities, dismissing at least 10 professors on August 29 alone.[18] The regime is targeting universities because university students largely spearheaded last year's Mahsa Amini movement. The regime has also established checkpoints at the entrances of various cities in Kurdistan Province and deployed security forces and helicopters to Kurdistan and West Azerbaijan provinces.[19] Around 21 percent of the anti-regime protests between September 16 and December 22, 2022, occurred in Kurdistan and West Azerbaijan provinces, as CTP previously reported.[20]

Senior Iranian officials outlined the regime's policy perspective on Iran-Turkey bilateral relations during their meetings with Turkish Foreign Affairs Minister Hakan Fidan in Tehran on September 3. President Ebrahim Raisi, Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian, and Supreme National Security Council Secretary Rear Admiral Ali Akbar Ahmadian met with Fidan during his visit to Tehran.[21] All three Iranian officials echoed previous rhetoric about Iran's opposition to foreign interference in the Caucasus. They further emphasized pursuing diplomatic efforts to address these concerns, including the extant 3+3 format, which would involve Iran, Turkey, Russia, and the states in the Caucasus. Iran perceives a threat emanating from the growing Turkish and Israeli influence in the region and Iranian officials have previously stated their desire to diplomatically manage their concerns.[22] Raisi and Abdollahian similarly endorsed respect for Syria's national sovereignty and achieving a diplomatic solution to Turkey's concerns in Syria. This is consistent with Iran's recent participation in the Astana diplomatic process to resolve tensions between Turkey and the Syrian regime and eventuate a Turkish withdrawal from Syria.[23] All three Iranian officials finally reiterated Iran's commitment to reach the bilateral trade goal of \$30 billion with Turkey, which Iranian officials first articulated in 2021.[24] The Raisi administration has engaged in economic diplomacy with a slew of regional and extra-regional countries in recent months to generate revenue for the Iranian economy and secure regime stability.[25]

[1] [https://npasyria\(dot\)com/en/103799/](https://npasyria(dot)com/en/103799/); [https://deirezzor24\(dot\)net/en/the-tribes-have-held-a-meeting-in-hatlah-town-northeast-of-deir-ezzor-under-the-partnership-of-russia/](https://deirezzor24(dot)net/en/the-tribes-have-held-a-meeting-in-hatlah-town-northeast-of-deir-ezzor-under-the-partnership-of-russia/)

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IRAN UPDATE, SEPTEMBER 7, 2023

Iran Update, September 7, 2023

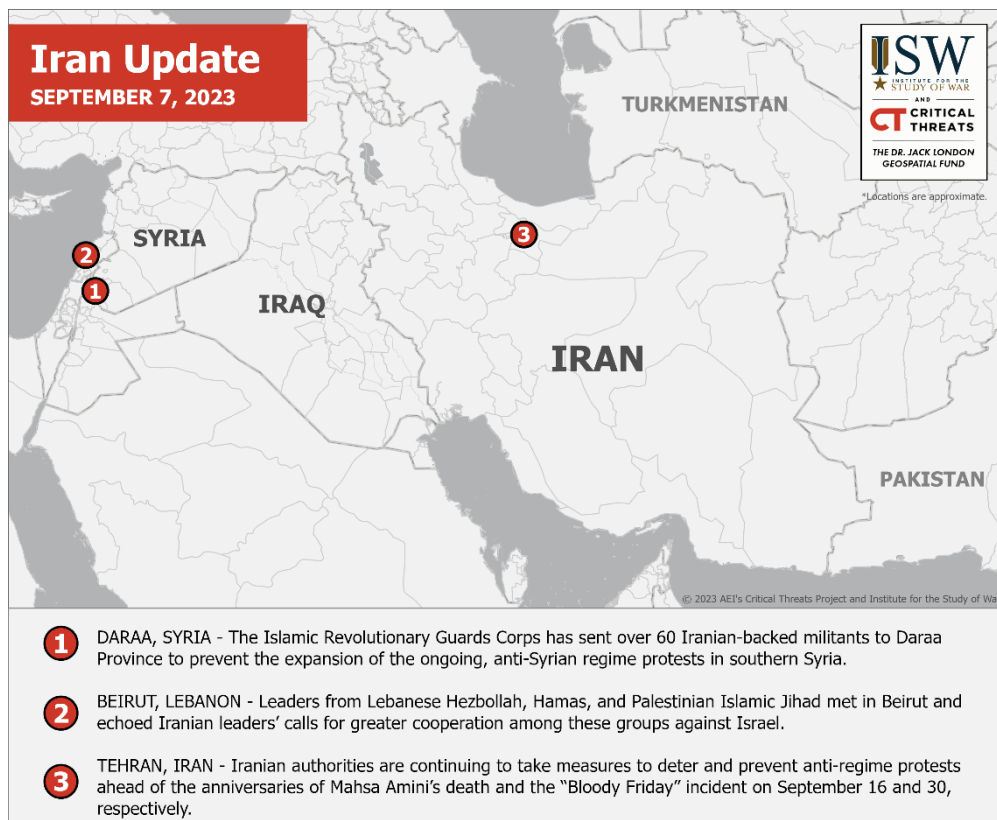
Andie Parry, Annika Ganzeveld, and Nicholas Carl

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

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

Key Takeaways

1. The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps has sent over 60 Iranian-backed militants to Daraa Province to prevent the expansion of the ongoing, anti-Syrian regime protests in southern Syria.
2. Leaders from Lebanese Hezbollah, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad met in Beirut and echoed Iranian leaders' calls for greater cooperation among these groups against Israel.
3. Iranian authorities are continuing to take measures to deter and prevent anti-regime protests ahead of the anniversaries of Mahsa Amini's death and the "Bloody Friday" incident on September 16 and 30, respectively.



Iranian Activities in the Levant

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

The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps has sent over 60 Iranian-backed militants to Daraa Province to prevent the expansion of the ongoing, anti-Syrian regime protests in southern Syria.[1] The militants include Iraqi, Lebanese, and Syrian fighters and are operating under Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) and the Iranian-backed Syrian Arab Army 4th Division, according to Syrian opposition reports on September 7. The militants will reportedly cooperate with the 4th Division to stoke instability in Daraa and Suwayda provinces and blame ISIS, which would provide the regime a pretext for a harsher crackdown on demonstrators. These reports came as separate opposition reports claimed that Syrian regime military and security officers met in Daraa City to discuss how to control the anti-regime protests that have fluctuated throughout Syria since mid-August 2023. The reports that the IRGC is cooperating with the Bashar al Assad regime to impose social control is consistent with ISW's previous reporting that Iranian-backed snipers deployed to southern Syria twice in late August 2023, likely to deter and prevent the expansion of protests.[2]

Leaders from LH, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) met in Beirut and echoed Iranian leaders' calls for greater cooperation among these groups against Israel. The meeting occurred on September 2 and included LH Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, Hamas deputy head Saleh al Arouri, and PIJ head Ziyad al Nakhalah.[3] This meeting is especially noteworthy given how rare such meetings between all three figures are. Hamas and PIJ leadership similarly met in Gaza in August 2023 to discuss enhancing cooperation against Israel.[4] These meetings come as Iranian leaders have increasingly emphasized the importance of greater cohesion and unity across the resistance groups opposing Israel.[5]

Iranian Domestic and Political Affairs

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

Iranian authorities are continuing to take measures to deter and prevent anti-regime protests ahead of the anniversaries of Mahsa Amini's death and the "Bloody Friday" incident on September 16 and 30, respectively. Protest coordinators and organizations have planned demonstrations in the coming weeks, as CTP previously reported.[6]

- Iranian intelligence services announced the arrest of a network of protest planners on September 7.[7] The regime similarly arrested a group of women's rights activists on August 17 for planning to "incite chaos and vandalism" on the anniversary of Mahsa Amini's death.[8]
- The regime is planning outreach to Iran's Sunni minority community likely to reduce the risk of major unrest in the eastern Iranian provinces. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei will meet with residents from Sistan and Baluchistan and South Khorasan provinces on September 11.[9] Demonstrations against the regime have occurred weekly in Sistan and Baluchistan Province since regime security forces violently suppressed protesters in Zahedan in September 2022 in an event that became known as "Bloody Friday." [10]

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IRAN UPDATE, SEPTEMBER 8, 2023

Iran Update, September 8, 2023

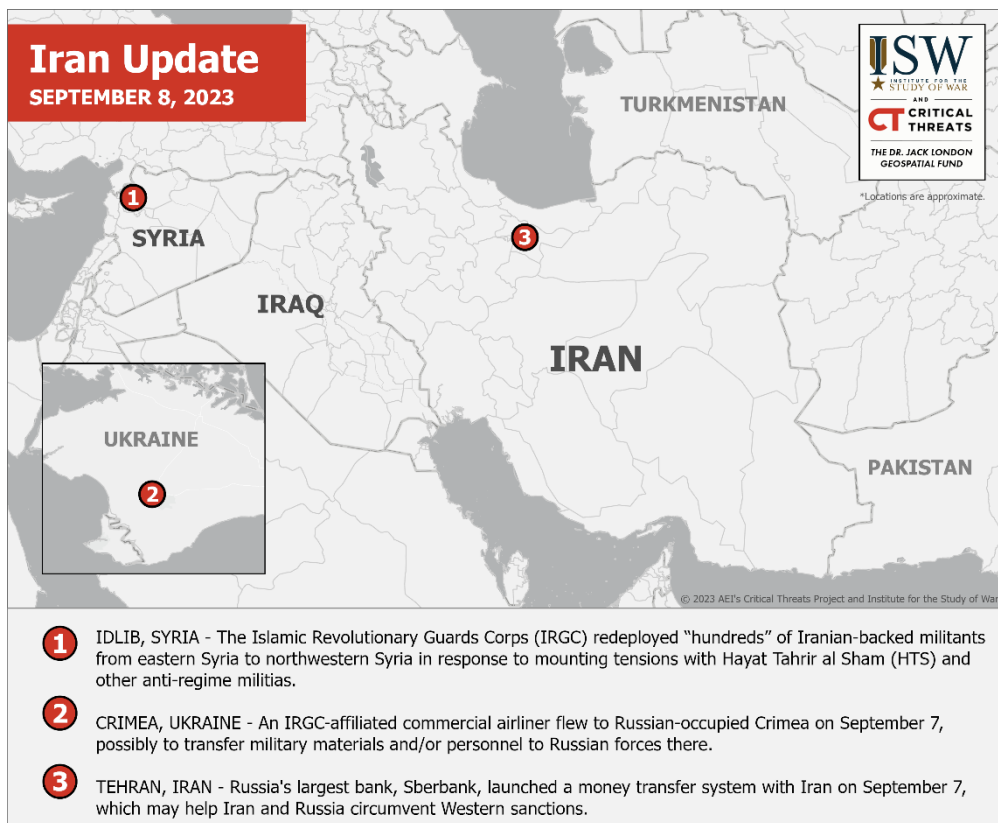
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Key Takeaways

1. The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) redeployed “hundreds” of Iranian-backed militants from eastern Syria to northwestern Syria in response to mounting tensions with Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) and other anti-regime militias.
2. An IRGC-affiliated commercial airliner flew to Russian-occupied Crimea on September 7, possibly to transfer military materials and/or personnel to Russian forces there.
3. Russia's largest bank, Sberbank, launched a money transfer system with Iran on September 7, which may help Iran and Russia circumvent Western sanctions.



Iranian Activities in the Levant

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

The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) redeployed "hundreds" of Iranian-backed militants from eastern Syria to northwestern Syria in response to mounting tensions with Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) and other anti-regime militias. These militants came from the Fatemiyoun Division, which is an IRGC-controlled Afghan Shia militia that has fought extensively throughout Syria. The IRGC sent the Fatemiyoun fighters to Syrian Arab Army (SAA) positions in Aleppo, Homs, and Latakia provinces, according to Syrian opposition media.[1] These deployments occurred as fighting between HTS and pro-regime forces has intensified in recent weeks.[2] Recent HTS attacks against the SAA have caused an unusually high number of casualties compared to previous attacks.[3] The Fatemiyoun militants could support pro-regime operations against HTS military targets. The SAA and Russian forces have conducted strikes into HTS-territory in recent days.[4] The Fatemiyoun Division operates several different Iranian-made combat and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance drones, which would be capable of supporting such operations against HTS. CTP previously reported that Lebanese Hezbollah provided drone training to Fatemiyoun militants in Deir ez Zor Province on August 2 as well.[5] The IRGC decision to send Fatemiyoun militants from eastern Syria to northwestern Syria is consistent with Iran's prioritization of stabilizing the Syrian regime relative to the Iranian campaign to expel the United States from Syria. Iran, Russia, and the Syrian regime amassed forces around the line of contact with the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces in Deir ez Zor Province in July and August 2023, likely as part of an effort to coerce the United States to withdraw its forces from Syria.[6] The IRGC has since then pulled forces away from the line of contact for different reasons all meant to stabilize the Syrian regime and secure its hold on power. CTP previously reported that Iranian-backed militants relocated from Deir ez Zor Province to southern Syria on September 4, possibly to deter and prevent anti-Syrian regime protests in southern Syria.[7]

Iranian Domestic and Political Affairs

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

An IRGC-affiliated commercial airliner flew to Russian-occupied Crimea on September 7, possibly to transfer military materials and/or personnel to Russian positions there.

[8] The airliner is operated by Pouya Air, which the United States and European Union have sanctioned for transferring military materials throughout the Middle East on behalf of the IRGC.[9] Pouya Air denied that the airliner was in Crimea and was "helping Russian forces." [10] The Ukrainian military has accused Russia of using the Chauba training ground in Crimea to launch Iranian Shahed-131 and -136 drones against Ukrainian targets.[11] The flight to Crimea is particularly noteworthy given that Israeli and Ukrainian media have reported that Russia has experienced "logistical problems" in transporting Iranian drones from the Middle East to the frontlines in Ukraine.[12] Iran is helping construct a drone-manufacturing factory in Russia to resolve this problem, but the factory is not expected to be completed until at least early 2024.[13] The Pouya Air flight to Crimea comes after the IRGC and Lebanese Hezbollah trained Russian forces in Syria on how to operate Iranian drones on August 31, which CTP previously reported.[14]

Russia's largest bank, Sberbank, launched a money transfer system with Iran on September 7, which may help Iran and Russia circumvent Western sanctions.

[15] Sberbank announced that Russian businesses and citizens can now transfer money to Iran's Pasargad Bank. This announcement is part of a larger trend of growing financial cooperation between Iran and Russia. Russia's second largest bank, VTB, similarly launched its own money transfer system with Iran in December 2022.[16] Iran and Russia additionally established direct financial communication channels between Iranian banks and over 800 Russian banks in January 2023.[17] Central Bank of Iran Deputy Governor Mohsen Karimi emphasized at the time that Iranian and Russian banks no longer need SWIFT for financial transactions because they rely on "national systems." [18] SWIFT is a Belgium-based financial messaging platform that conducts most international money and security transfers.[19] CTP previously reported that Iran has sought an alternative to SWIFT ever since SWIFT disconnected Iran from its platform in 2018.[20]

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[-4/1311477-](https://www.ilna.ir/%D8%A8%D8%AE%D8%B4-%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%AA%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%AF%DB%8C-4/1311477-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%86%DA%A9-%D8%A8%D8%B2%D8%B1%DA%AF-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%DB%8C%D9%87-%D8%AE%D8%AF%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%AC%D8%AF%DB%8C%D8%AF%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%B1-)

[-4/1311477-](https://www.ilna.ir/%D8%A8%D8%AE%D8%B4-%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%AA%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%AF%DB%8C-4/1311477-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%86%DA%A9-%D8%A8%D8%B2%D8%B1%DA%AF-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%DB%8C%D9%87-%D8%AE%D8%AF%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%AC%D8%AF%DB%8C%D8%AF%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%B1-)

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IRAN UPDATE, SEPTEMBER 11, 2023

Iran Update, September 11, 2023

Amin Soltani, Johanna Moore, and Annika Ganzeveld

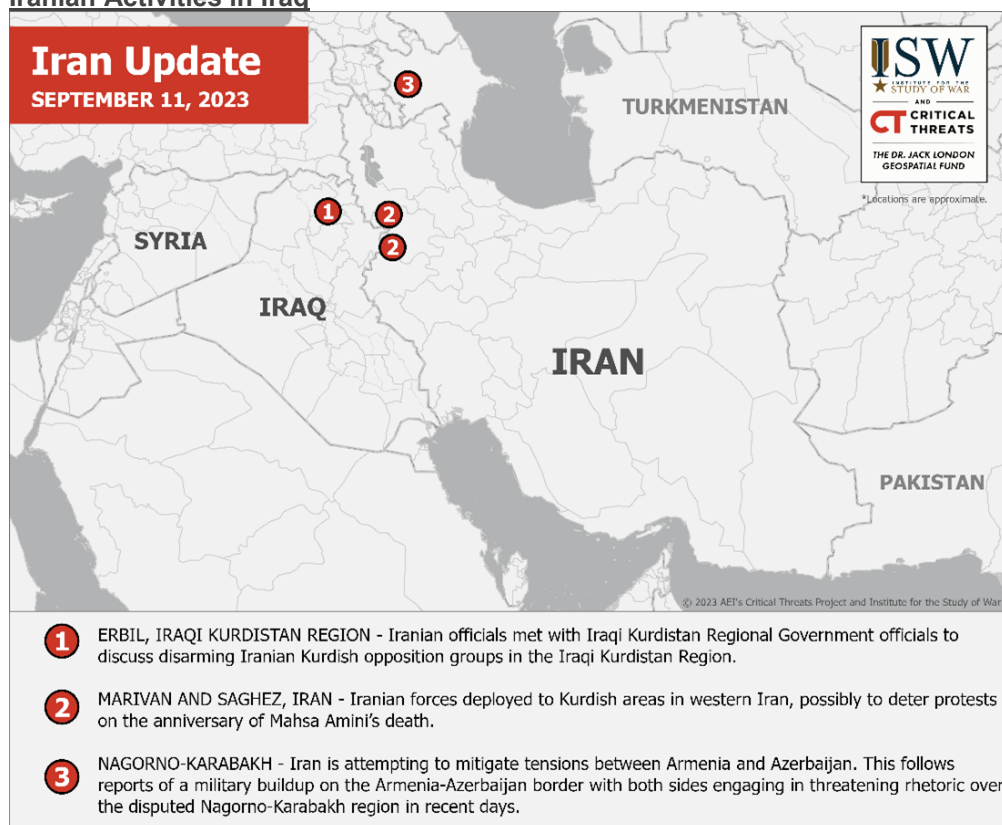
The Iran Update aims to inform national security policy by providing timely, relevant, and independent open-source analysis of developments pertaining to Iran and its Axis of Resistance. This update covers political, military, and economic events and trends that affect the stability and decision-making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

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Key Takeaways

1. Iranian officials met with Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government officials to discuss disarming Iranian Kurdish opposition groups in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region.
2. Iranian forces deployed to Kurdish areas in western Iran, possibly to deter protests on the anniversary of Mahsa Amini's death.
3. Iran is attempting to mitigate tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan. This follows reports of a military buildup on the Armenia-Azerbaijan border with both sides engaging in threatening rhetoric over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region in recent days.

Iranian Activities in Iraq



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

Iranian officials met with Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) officials to discuss disarming Iranian Kurdish opposition groups in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR). This suggests that Iran is prioritizing gaining Kurdish support to implement the security agreement over conducting attacks against Iranian opposition groups in the IKR in the near term. Iranian Ambassador to Iraq Mohammad Kazem Al-e Sadegh met with KRG Prime Minister Masoud Barzani and KRG President Nechevin Barzani on September 11 to discuss bilateral relations. Their discussions included the Iran-Iraq security agreement that the Iranian and Iraqi governments signed in March 2023 that stipulated the Iraqi government will disarm and remove Iranian Kurdish opposition groups from the IKR by August 23.[1] Iranian leadership moved the deadline back to September 19. Iranian officials have warned that security forces would act if the Iraqi government did not fulfill the agreement, however.[2] Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al Sudani stated that the Iraqi Army had deployed over 3,000 troops to the Iraqi Kurdistan-Iran border during a press conference, according to Iranian state-owned media outlet *Tasnim*. [3] CTP, however, has not recorded any instances of Iraqi forces reinforcing the IKR-Iranian border.

Iranian forces deployed to Kurdish areas in western Iran, possibly to deter protests on the anniversary of Mahsa Amini's death. Iran deployed military personnel and weaponry to Boukan and Mahabad, West Azerbaijan Province and Marivan and Saghez, Kurdistan Province on the Iran-Iraqi Kurdistan border between August 18 and September 11.[4] These primarily Kurdish towns were major hotspots during the height of the Masha Amini protest wave and suffered some of the harshest protest suppression from Iranian security forces, as CTP previously reported.[5] Foreign Affairs Ministry spokesperson Nasser Kanani praised the Iraqi government in a statement on September 11 for taking "good measures" to implement the security agreement following these deployments.[6] The deployments to western Iran could support Iranian attacks into Iraqi Kurdistan after the anniversary of Mahsa Amini's death. Iran has given the Iraqi government a deadline of September 19 to disarm Iranian Kurdish opposition groups in the IKR. Iran gave a similar ultimatum to the Iraqi government in November

2022, claiming that Kurdish opposition groups were arming and fueling the Masha Amini protest movement, particularly in western Iran.[7] Iranian forces launched attacks into the IKR targeting the Kurdish opposition groups when the Iraqi government did not comply.[8]

Iranian Domestic and Political Affairs

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

Iran is attempting to mitigate tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Iranian Foreign Affairs Ministry spokesperson Nasser Kanani stated on September 11 that Iran is diplomatically engaged with Armenia and Azerbaijan to ensure peace and security in the Caucasus.[9] A high-level Iranian military delegation met with Azerbaijani Defense Ministry officials in Baku on September 9 to discuss enhancing Azerbaijani-Iranian military cooperation and ensuring stability on the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan.[10] President Ebrahim Raisi called for dialogue to resolve regional tensions during a phone call with Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan on September 9.[11] This follows reports of a military buildup on the Armenia-Azerbaijan border with both sides engaging in threatening rhetoric over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region in recent days.[12]

Raisi also stressed that Iran is prepared to assume an “effective role” as a “powerful neighbor” to prevent geopolitical changes in the Caucasus during his phone call with Pashinyan. Raisi’s statement is noteworthy given the regime’s recently expressed concerns about geopolitical trends in the region. Senior Iranian officials, including Raisi, emphasized Iran’s strong opposition to foreign interference and geopolitical changes in the Caucasus during their meetings with Turkish Foreign Affairs Minister Hakan Fidan in Tehran on September 3.[13] Supreme Leader Foreign Policy Advisor Ali Akbar Velayati warned on July 13 that Turkish and NATO interference in the Caucasus will raise the risk of conflict in the region which Iran’s adversaries -- specifically the United States and Israel -- will exploit to “undermine the security of the entire region.”[14]

Israel-based i24News and Kuwaiti newspaper Al Jarida claimed on September 11 that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has authorized Iranian military intervention in the Caucasus. The outlets also claimed that India, Iran, and Russia have supplied Armenia with a substantial amount of military equipment over the past month.[15] i24News similarly claimed on July 16 that Armenia has used Iranian Shahed drones in several recent clashes with Azerbaijan.[16] CTP cannot independently verify any of the above claims. The claim that Iran has supplied drones and military equipment to Armenia is consistent with Supreme Leader Military Affairs Adviser and former IRGC Commander Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi’s assertion in October 2022 that 22 countries, including Armenia, sought to buy Iranian drones.[17] The claim also follows reports of recrudescing tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region in recent days and Iranian attempts to mitigate the tensions.[18] Senior Iranian officials have, furthermore, expressed Iran’s vehement opposition to and willingness to prevent geopolitical changes in the Caucasus in recent months.[19] Iran’s provision of drones to Armenia would also be part of the regime’s larger effort to leverage arms sales to generate revenue for the Iranian economy, as CTP previously assessed.[20]

Flightradar24 incorrectly reported that a Pouya Air aircraft flew to Russian-occupied Crimea on September 7.[21] This announcement changes CTP’s assessment that the aircraft was possibly transferring military materials and/or personnel to Russian positions in Crimea. Iran continues to supply Russia with military equipment via other routes, such as the Caspian Sea route, however.[22]

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IRAN UPDATE, SEPTEMBER 12, 2023

Iran Update, September 12, 2023

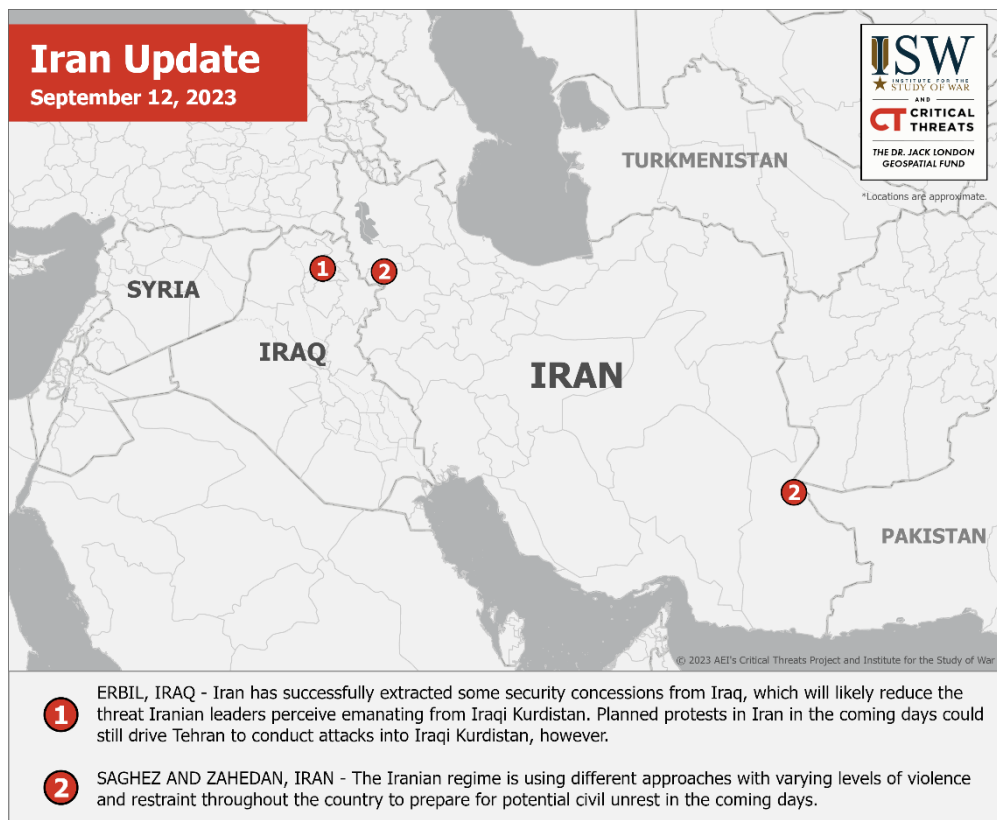
Johanna Moore, Amin Soltani, Annika Ganzeveld, and Nicholas Carl

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Key Takeaways

1. Iran has successfully extracted some security concessions from Iraq, which will likely reduce the threat Iranian leaders perceive emanating from Iraqi Kurdistan. Planned protests in Iran in the coming days could still drive Tehran to conduct attacks into Iraqi Kurdistan, however.
2. The Iranian regime is using different approaches with varying levels of violence and restraint throughout the country to prepare for potential civil unrest in the coming days.



Iranian Activities in Iraq

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

Iran has successfully extracted some security concessions from Iraq, which will likely reduce the threat Iranian leaders perceive emanating from Iraqi Kurdistan. Iranian and Iraqi officials have held a series of meetings in recent days to discuss implementing a security agreement that they reached in March 2023. The agreement stipulates that Iraqi and Iraqi Kurdish authorities will disarm and relocate anti-Iranian regime Kurdish militias operating in Iraqi Kurdistan.[1] Iranian leaders have repeatedly accused these groups of stoking unrest within Iran and especially among the Iranian Kurdish community and have threatened to conduct attacks into Iraq if Iraqi and Iraqi Kurdish authorities do not disarm and relocate these groups.[2] Iraqi Foreign Affairs Minister and member of the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) Fuad Hussein announced on September 12 that the Kurdistan Regional Government has begun relocating some of these militias away from the border with Iran to unspecified areas in central Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan.[3] Hussein will travel to Tehran on September 13 for further discussions on the subject.[4] Independent journalists have similarly reported that members of the Iranian Kurdish Democratic Party evacuated three villages near the border with Iran.[5] These reports are consistent with Iranian Foreign Affairs Ministry spokesperson Nasser Kanani praising Iraq for taking "good measures" to begin implementing the Iran-Iraq security agreement.[6] Planned protests in Iran in the coming days could still drive Tehran to conduct attacks into Iraqi Kurdistan, however. Iranian leaders and state media have repeatedly asserted that the Kurdish militias in Iraq fueled unrest during the Mahsa Amini protest movement in fall 2022.[7] Iran conducted a series of drone, missile, and rocket attacks into Iraqi Kurdistan during the protests to respond to this perceived threat.[8] Protest organizations have planned additional demonstrations to commemorate the one-year anniversary of Mahsa Amini's killing on September 16, which risks increasing the threat that Iranian leaders perceive emanating from Iraqi Kurdistan.[9]

Iranian Domestic and Political Affairs

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

The Iranian regime is using different approaches with varying levels of violence and restraint throughout the country to prepare for potential civil unrest in the coming days. Iranian leaders are concerned about potential anti-regime protests as the one-year anniversaries of the death of Mahsa Amini and the “Bloody Friday” incident approach on September 16 and 30, respectively. Iranian state security services may violently suppress demonstrations that erupt in northwestern Iran. These forces may contrastingly use a more restrained approach to respond to unrest in southeastern Iran.

- Iranian authorities, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, have expressed concern about potential protests in the coming days and called on regime security forces to prepare.^[10] The regime has accordingly taken measures to deter and preempt protests, such as deploying security forces and arresting civil society activists, whom the regime has deemed a threat.^[11] The regime has also increased its monitoring of cyberspace, as CTP previously reported.^[12]
- The regime has deployed security forces, helicopters, military vehicles, and heavy military equipment to multiple cities in Kurdistan and West Azerbaijan provinces in northwestern Iran in recent weeks.^[13] The regime has additionally established checkpoints at the entrances of various Kurdish cities.^[14] This security activity around northwestern Iran is unsurprising given that the Mahsa Amini movement was heavily concentrated in this area. The regime similarly used extreme violence against protests in northwestern Iran during the Mahsa Amini movement.^[15]
- Senior Iranian officials have adopted a conciliatory tone towards Iran's Sunni minority in recent weeks. President Ebrahim Raisi praised Sunni clerics from Sistan and Baluchistan Province, Kurdistan Province, and Turkmen Sahra for thinking about Iran's "national interests and honor" during a meeting with Sunni clerics on August 31.^[16] Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei separately praised the “warm-hearted” people of Sistan and Baluchistan Province and discussed his “sweet and meaningful” interactions with Sunni scholars during a meeting with Sistan and Baluchistan and South Khorasan provinces’ residents on September 11.^[17] These conciliatory remarks do not signal that the regime is planning a violent crackdown in the southeast. Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchistan Province residents have additionally held weekly protests since September 2022, when regime security forces violently suppressed protesters in an event that became known as “Bloody Friday.”^[18] Security forces killed at least 82 people on “Bloody Friday.”^[19] Regime security forces violently suppressing protests in Sistan and Baluchistan Province would risk further enflaming the ongoing unrest there.

[1] <https://www.shafaqdot.com/ar/%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9/%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B2%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%8A-%D9%83%D8%AF-%D8%AF%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%87-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D8%AE%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%84-%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7-%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%83%D9%8A-%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%B8%D8%B1-%D8%AE%D8%B7%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B5%D8%AD%D9%8A%D8%AD-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%88%D8%B6%D8%A7%D8%B9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%88%D9%83> ; <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1402/06/20/2954855> ; <https://www.irna.ir/news/85225865> ; <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iraq-starts-relocating-iranian...>

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[3] <https://www.kurdistan24.net/ckb/story/243049-%D9%81%D9%88%D8%A6%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%AD%D9%88%D8%B3%DB%8E%D9%86-%D9%87%DB%95%D8%B1%DB%8E%D9%85%DB%8C-%DA%A9%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%AF%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%B1%DB%8E%DA%A9%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D8%A8%DB%86-%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%AE%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%86%DB%95%D9%88%DB%95%DB%8C-%D8%A6%DB%86%D9%BE%DB%86%D8%B2%D8%B3%DB%8C%DB%86%D9%86%DB%8C-%D8%A6%DB%8E%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%84%DB%95->

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[4] <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1402/06/21/2955129> ; <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iraq-starts-relocating-iranian...>

[5] https://t.me/Hanata_Republic/1012 ; <https://twitter.com/MahmoodYKurdi/status/1701289607092998487>

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[7] <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2023/09/12/2954827> ; <https://www.irna.ir/news/85223421> ; <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1401/07/06/2780803/> ; <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/11/21/iran-attacks-positions-in-northern-iraq-targeting-kurdish-groupso>

[8] <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/11/21/iran-attacks-positions-in-northern-iraq-targeting-kurdish-groupso> ; <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-september-29> ; <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-september-28> ; <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-october-2> ; <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-october-4> ; <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-october-5> ; <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-october-16> ; <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-october-11> ; <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-november-22> ; <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-november-20> ; <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-november-14>

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[16] <https://www.irna.ir/news/85216474>

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[18] <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/12/22/iran-bloody-friday-crackdown-years-d...>

[19] <https://www.wsj.com/articles/irans-protesters-mark-bloody-friday-deaths-...> ; <https://www.voanews.com/a/at-least-537-killed-in-iran-protest-crackdown-...>

IRAN UPDATE, SEPTEMBER 13, 2023

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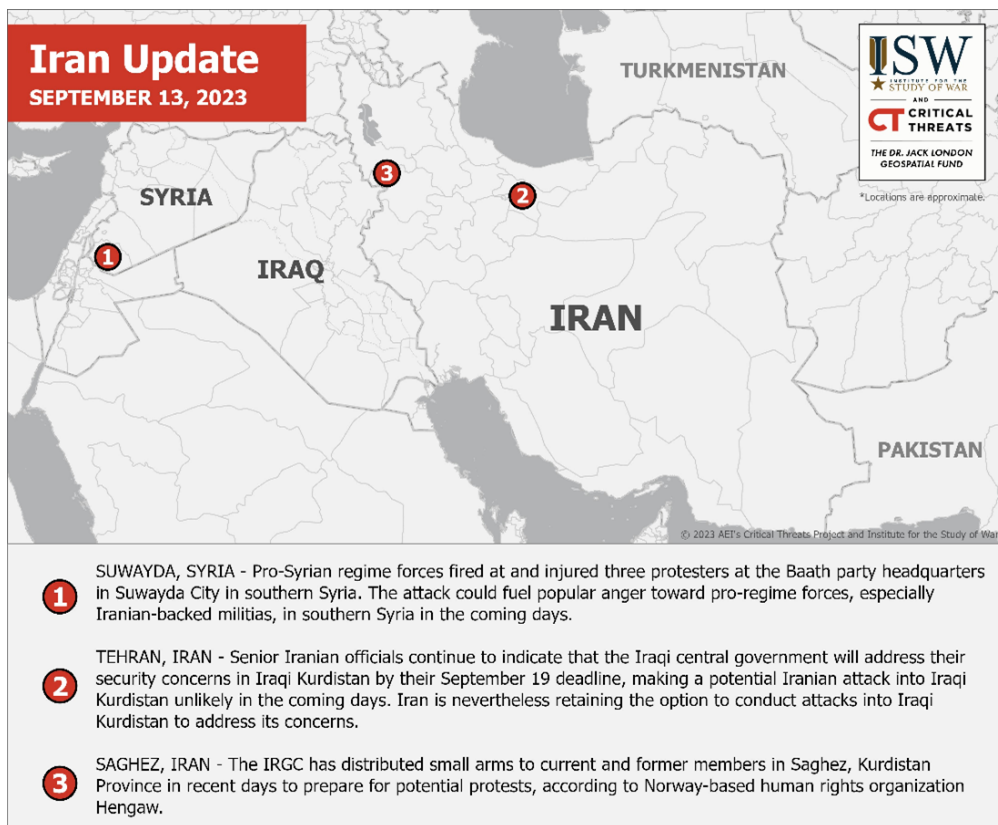
Andie Parry, Johanna Moore, Amin Soltani, Annika Ganzeveld, and Nicholas Carl

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

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

Key Takeaways

1. Pro-Syrian regime forces fired at and injured three protesters at the Baath party headquarters in Suwayda City in southern Syria. The attack could fuel popular anger toward pro-regime forces, especially Iranian-backed militias, in southern Syria in the coming days.
2. Senior Iranian officials continue to indicate that the Iraqi central government will address their security concerns in Iraqi Kurdistan by their September 19 deadline, making a potential Iranian attack on Iraqi Kurdistan unlikely in the coming days. Iran is nevertheless retaining the option to conduct attacks on Iraqi Kurdistan to address its concerns.
3. The IRGC has distributed small arms to current and former members in Saghez, Kurdistan Province in recent days to prepare for potential protests, according to Norway-based human rights organization Hengaw.



Iranian Activities in the Levant

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

Pro-Syrian regime forces fired at and injured three protesters at the Baath party headquarters in Suwayda City in southern Syria on September 13.^[1] The attack is the first well-documented instance of pro-regime forces using violence against protesters in Suwayda since the protests erupted in mid-August 2023. The attack failed to meaningfully reduce protest turnout, as protesters continued to demonstrate and even closed Baath party headquarters in other nearby towns after the attack.^[2]

The attack could fuel popular anger toward pro-regime forces, especially Iranian-backed militias, in southern Syria in the coming days. A local Druze leader called for "jihad" against Iranian-backed militias in response to the shooting.^[3] Protesters and other Druze sheikhs have blamed Iranian-backed militias for the crackdown as well.^[4] These accusations are particularly noteworthy given that the Druze community has played a significant role in leading the current wave of protests. These accusations also follow several reports of Iranian-backed militants traveling to southern Syria in recent weeks to subvert and violently suppress the protests.^[5]

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.

Senior Iranian officials continue to indicate that the Iraqi central government will address their security concerns in Iraqi Kurdistan by their September 19 deadline, making a potential Iranian attack into Iraqi Kurdistan unlikely in the coming days. Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian met with his Iraqi counterpart Fuad Hussein in Tehran on September 13 and stated afterward that Baghdad will fully implement the joint security agreement in the coming days.^[6] The agreement

stipulates that Iraqi authorities will disarm and relocate anti-Iranian regime Kurdish militias operating in Iraqi Kurdistan who Iranian leaders have repeatedly accused these groups of stoking unrest within Iran and especially among the Iranian Kurdish community.[7] Iranian leadership has threatened to conduct attacks into Iraqi Kurdistan if Iraqi authorities do not address Iranian security concerns by fully implementing the security agreement by September 19. Abdollahian acknowledged Iraqi and Kurdistan Regional Government efforts to remove Kurdish opposition groups from the border with Iran in a statement on September 11.[8] He later thanked Hussein during their meeting on September 13 for removing Kurdish opposition groups from the Iranian border and voiced his hope that the two countries would continue the path of diplomacy.[9]

Iran may conduct attacks into Iraqi Kurdistan if Iranian leaders conclude that the anti-regime Kurdish groups in Iraqi Kurdistan are fueling unrest within Iran. Iranian forces conducted airstrikes into the Iraqi Kurdistan region between October and November 2022 at the height of the Masha Amini protest movement to stop a perceived threat from Kurdish separatist groups fueling protests within primarily Kurdish towns in western Iran.[10] The IRGC Ground Forces deployed units, including artillery elements, to unspecified locations in northwestern Iran to promote border stability, according to Iranian state media on September 13.[11] Iranian state media framed the deployments as part of the Iranian leaders' repeated commitment to conduct attacks into Iraqi Kurdistan if Iraqi authorities do not fully implement the security agreement.[12] Iran will not likely conduct attacks, however, because CTP has not yet observed these conditions. Planned protests in Iran to celebrate the anniversary of Masha Amini's death on September 16 could create such conditions, however, as CTP previously assessed.[13]

Iranian Domestic and Political Affairs

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

The IRGC has distributed small arms to current and former members in Saghez, Kurdistan Province in recent days to prepare for potential protests, according to Norway-based human rights organization Hengaw.[14] The group previously reported that the Iranian regime recalled retired IRGC and Basij members to service ahead of the one-year anniversary of Mahsa Amini's death on September 16.[15] Protest organizations have planned anti-regime demonstrations in Iran to commemorate the occasion. The reported security measures are consistent with CTP's assessment that regime security forces may violently suppress protests that erupt in northwestern Iran in the coming days.[16] The regime has securitized cities in northwestern Kurdistan and West Azerbaijan provinces and sent additional military equipment to these areas in recent weeks.[17]

[1] <https://www.facebook.com/Suwayda24/posts/pfbid02NLneEtdpxrVN5owYjB2fpxXe...> ; <https://www.facebook.com/Suwayda24/posts/pfbid0EaBrFuVswTjzW373EkyQCBRZH...>

[2] <https://www.facebook.com/Suwayda24/posts/pfbid0tWzNY4vASpPyCAB23wsjEfUNH6dH6CJ3s...> ; <https://www.facebook.com/Suwayda24/posts/pfbid02PfnF7miwTk7uq8Jjoqmu4UdL...> ; <https://www.facebook.com/Suwayda24/posts/pfbid02NsNDRdxuXQvU38Yxgiq6xWN...> ; <https://www.facebook.com/alraased/posts/pfbid02UHnK5tCmqhdUDSMMdcgU5i2uw...>

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%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%86%DB%8C%D8%AA%DB%8C-%D8%B1%D8%A7-
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IRAN UPDATE, SEPTEMBER 14, 2023

Iran Update, September 14, 2023

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

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

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

Key Takeaways

1. The IRGC Quds Force and LH are trying to significantly increase their military infrastructure in Mayadin in eastern Syria. The expanding presence there in part supports the Iranian campaign to expel US forces from Syria.
2. Iranian-backed political actors in Iraq are preparing to coopt legal procedures and requirements to disqualify opponents in the upcoming Iraqi provincial elections in December 2023.
3. Iranian leaders are using a combination of military threats and foreign diplomacy to resolve three simultaneous security challenges around northwestern Iran.



Iranian Activities in the Levant

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

The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Quds Force and Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) are trying to significantly increase their military infrastructure in Mayadin in eastern Syria. The IRGC Quds Force plans to build up its nearby Soleimani base into the largest Iranian military base abroad, according to local reports on September 13.[1] This plan involves transferring unspecified weapons from the Imam Ali base on the Iraq-Syria border to the Soleimani base. The Imam Ali base is the largest Iranian military base abroad, which the IRGC uses to house drones, missiles, and fighters.[2] CTP previously reported that the IRGC Quds force and LH established a joint headquarters in Mayadin in June 2023 and prepared a runway to support drone operations near Mayadin in August 2023.[3] This expanding presence in Mayadin in part supports the Iranian campaign to expel US forces from Syria. CTP has reported extensively on how Iran has sought to create an increasingly hostile operating environment for US forces in Syria to this end. The buildup of military infrastructure in Mayadin is consistent with fostering this kind of environment. Mayadin is an especially noteworthy location given that it is across the river from US positions in eastern Syria.

Iranian Activities in Iraq

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

Iranian-backed political actors in Iraq are preparing to coopt legal procedures and requirements to disqualify opponents in the upcoming Iraqi provincial elections in December 2023. Judge Haydar Hanoun—the head of the Federal Integrity Commission and affiliated with the Iranian-backed Badr Organization—announced on September 14 that his commission will audit candidates, their families, and

their affiliates for corruption ahead of the elections.[4] This announcement comes after the Shia Coordination Framework—a loose coalition of Iranian-backed political parties—approved in March 2023 legal amendments that prohibit individuals charged with corruption from running for office.[5] CTP assessed at the time that the Federal Integrity Commission could use these amendments to marginalize political opponents by charging them with corruption.[6]

Iranian Domestic and Political Affairs

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

Iranian leaders are using a combination of military threats and foreign diplomacy to resolve three simultaneous security challenges around northwestern Iran.

- Regime security forces have deployed units to northwestern Iran in recent weeks to deter and prevent the eruption of anti-regime protests.[7] Iranian leaders have expressed concerns that protests could ignite, especially in Kurdish-majority areas in the northwest, to commemorate the one-year anniversary of Mahsa Amini's death on September 16.[8] CTP previously assessed that the regime may violently suppress demonstrations that erupt in northwestern Iran in the coming days.[9]
- Iranian leaders are negotiating with Iraqi authorities to disarm and relocate anti-Iranian regime Kurdish militias operating in Iraqi Kurdistan.[10] Iranian leaders frequently accuse these militias of fueling unrest in Iran and have warned that they would conduct attacks into Iraqi Kurdistan if Iraqi authorities do not disarm and relocate the groups by September 19.[11] Senior Iranian officials have indicated that the Iraqi central government will meet their demands, making a potential Iranian attack on Iraqi Kurdistan unlikely in the coming days.[12]
- Iranian leaders have engaged Armenian, Azerbaijani, and Turkish officials in recent weeks to discuss rising tensions in the Caucasus.[13] Iranian leaders have repeatedly expressed concerns that Azerbaijan seeks to establish a land corridor that connects Azerbaijan proper, through Armenia, to its Nakhchivan enclave.[14] Such a corridor would directly connect Azerbaijan to Turkey and hamper Iranian economic access to European and Russian markets. The repeated engagements in recent days underscore Iranian leaders' desire to diffuse tensions through diplomatic means.

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IRAN UPDATE, SEPTEMBER 15, 2023

Iran Update, September 15, 2023

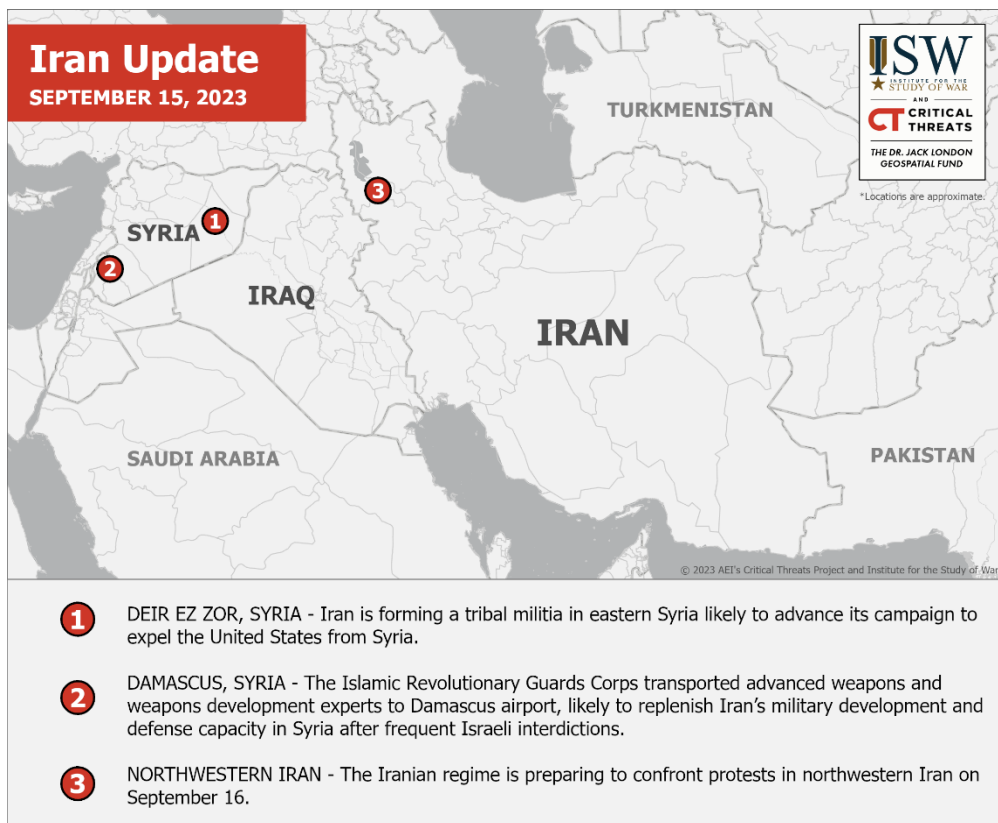
Ashka Jhaveri, Andie Parry, and Amin Soltani

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Key Takeaways

1. Iran is forming a tribal militia in eastern Syria likely to advance its campaign to expel the United States from Syria.
2. The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps transported advanced weapons and weapons development experts to Damascus airport, likely to replenish Iran's military development and defense capacity in Syria after frequent Israeli interdictions.
3. The Iranian regime is preparing to confront protests in northwestern Iran on September 16.



Iranian Activities in the Levant

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

Iran is forming a tribal militia in eastern Syria likely to advance its campaign to expel the United States from Syria. The coalition between the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the Arab tribes in Deir ez Zor Province is fracturing amid clashes over long-standing grievances.[1] Pro-regime forces launched attacks and conducted sabotage in SDF-controlled territory in late August and early September.[2] They also directed tribal leaders to attack the US-led international coalition.[3] These actions are consistent with the coordinated campaign that Iran, Russia, and the Syrian regime began forming in November 2022 to expel the United States from Syria.[4] Iran has long sought to build connections with Arab tribes in eastern Syria to form militias and acquire leverage against the United States and the SDF.[5]

- The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force established the "Hashemite Tribes Regiment" with local militia commanders including Quds Force-affiliated Nawaf al Bashir, according to a local report on September 13.[6] Bashir held meetings with unspecified Russian officials to create the militia and the Syrian regime supported its development, according to an Israeli think tank.[7] The tribe's purpose is to fight Kurdish forces and strengthen the Arab tribes' control of SDF-controlled territory.[8]
- People belonging to Arab tribes are fleeing SDF-controlled territory and settling in regime-controlled territory following the clashes.[9] The IRGC appointed a former Syrian regime general with ties to tribal sheikhs to recruiting tribesmen from regime and SDF-controlled territory, according to a report from a UK-based opposition outlet on September 10.[10] Iran has historically helped form militias from disenfranchised groups to pursue foreign policy objectives and exert influence over political establishments.[11]
- Iran, Russia, and the Syrian regime have been coordinating to expel the United States from Syria. Cultivating an anti-US grassroots resistance movement that conducts attacks on US forces is one component of Iran's campaign.[12] Iran has demonstrated an interest in using forces in SDF territory to further its campaign. The IRGC Quds Force recruited Syrians to establish "sleeping cells" in SDF-

controlled territory to attack US forces in June 2023 and tasked them to monitor US positions, plant explosive devices, and spread clan strife in the SDF region.[13]

The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps transported advanced weapons and weapons development experts to Damascus airport, likely to replenish Iran's military development and defense capacity in Syria after frequent Israeli interdictions. An IRGC-affiliated civilian aircraft flew several types of anti-tank guided missiles, military development specialists, and IRGC special forces to Damascus from Iran on September 13, according to *Political Keys*.^[14] CTP is unable to independently verify this report, although it is consistent with Iranian objectives and previous actions in Syria.

- Israeli Air Force airstrikes destroyed shared Iranian and Syria weapons caches, development centers, and air defenses in Hama and Tartus Province hours after the IRGC weapons shipment arrived in Damascus.^[15]
- Israel's airstrike campaign in March and April 2023 hit over 30 air defense and advanced conventional weapons related targets.^[16] The campaign has continued since April, at a rate of roughly two airstrikes a month.^[17] The IRGC has needed to continually replenish weapons destroyed in the campaign.
- Lebanese Hezbollah transferred two air defense systems capable of downing drones to Rif Dimashq province on September 13.^[18] Iran transfers conventional air defense weapons to Syria to bolster its military entrenchment and defensive capabilities. The IRGC, Iranian-backed militias, and the Syrian regime continually rebuild their air defense coverage after Israeli airstrikes.

Iranian Domestic and Political Affairs

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

The Iranian regime is preparing to confront protests in northwestern Iran on September

16. Intelligence and Security Minister Esmail Khatib stated on September 15 that Iran's foreign enemies are arming ethnic separatists and attempting to create insecurity ahead of anticipated unrest on Mahsa Amini's death anniversary on September 16.^[19] Iranian state media similarly claimed that intelligence and security officials have arrested individuals in possession of firearms, hand grenades, and other explosives in northwestern Iran between September 14 and 15.^[20] Other regime officials have repeatedly expressed concerns about the resumption of anti-regime demonstrations and border-area Kurdish separatists in northwestern Iran in recent weeks.^[21] The regime deployed security forces, helicopters, and heavy military equipment to multiple cities in Kurdistan, West Azerbaijan, and East Azerbaijan Provinces between September 14 and 15, reinforcing previous deployments to these areas in recent days.^[22] Iranian state media claimed on September 15 that intelligence and security forces patrols are "ensuring the comfort and security of the people."^[23]

The regime similarly deployed military vehicles with heavily armed troops to the northwest during the 2022 Mahsa Amini protest movement.^[24] The IRGC announced that it was "strengthening" its presence in the area and similarly emphasized its commitment to "protecting the security of the people." Approximately 21 percent of the anti-regime protests between September and December 2022 occurred in Kurdistan and West Azerbaijan provinces. Around 21 percent of protester deaths also occurred in Kurdistan and West Azerbaijan provinces, as CTP previously reported.^[25]

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IRAN UPDATE, SEPTEMBER 18, 2023

Iran Update, September 18, 2023

Johanna Moore and Amin Soltani

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

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

Key Takeaways

1. The IRGC deployed forces to the Iran-Iraq border, likely to coerce the Iraqi government and Kurdistan Regional Government to stop threats from anti-Iran opposition groups in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region.
2. Iran could also use the recent deployments to conduct attacks against Iraqi Kurdistan should coercion fail.
3. Defense and Armed Forces Logistics Minister Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Ashtiani threatened on September 16 to retaliate against the United States for its decision to unload seized Iranian oil from the *Suez Rajan* tanker.

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 IRGC deployed forces to the Iran-Iraq border, likely to coerce the Iraqi government and Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to stop threats from anti-Iran opposition groups in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR). The Iranian and Iraqi governments signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) in March 2023 stipulating that the Iraqi government is responsible for disarming and removing Kurdish opposition groups from the IKR.[1] Iranian officials threatened last week to conduct attacks on the IKR if Iraqi authorities do not fully implement the security agreement by September 19. Iranian officials have more recently acknowledged that the Iraqi government is meeting most of the stipulations in the MOU.[2] Protests around Mahsa Amini's death anniversary on September 16 did not materialize to the extent that regime officials and Western media expected. This provides the regime with an opportunity to use the northwest deployments to instead degrade Kurdish militants in the IKR without facing bandwidth constraints from suppressing protests, as CTP previously assessed.[3]

- The IRGC Ground Force deployed tanks, artillery, and multiple launch rocket (MLRS) systems to unspecified locations on Iran's northwestern borders on September 13.[4] IRGC-affiliated *Tasnim News Agency* claimed on September 13 that the deployments were meant to maintain border security.[5] Iran has previously used artillery and MLRS, in addition to missiles and drones, to target anti-regime groups in the IKR.[6]
- IRGC Operations Deputy Brigadier General Abbas Nilforoushan stated that if the Kurdish opposition groups are not completely disarmed and their headquarters are not properly dismantled, Iran will "protect the security of the country." [7] Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Nasser Kanani stated on September 18 that the Iraqi government had met many of the stipulations under the security agreement but was still in the process of fulfilling outstanding components.[8]
- Iranian security forces interdicted two separate Kurdish separatist groups in Kurdistan Province and Ilam Province between September 15 and 17 attempting to smuggle weapons into Iran from the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR) to arm protesters and conduct attacks.[9] Iranian officials, however, did not suggest that these arrests posed an increased risk to Iranian security and maintained that the Iraqi government was still working to fully implement their security agreement.

Iran could also use the recent deployments to conduct attacks against Iraqi Kurdistan should coercion fail. These deployments are suitable for both securing the border against armed militants and conducting attacks into the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR). Iranian officials and media continue to highlight the

threat Kurdish militants in the IKR pose to Iranian security.[10] Defense and Armed Forces Logistics Minister Mohammad Reza Ashtiani stated on September 18 that Iran will consider taking military action after the September 19 deadline, considering the regime's rhetoric in recent weeks.[11] Protests around Mahsa Amini's death anniversary on September 16 did not materialize to the extent that regime officials and Western media expected. This provides the regime with an opportunity to use the northwest deployments to instead degrade Kurdish militants in the IKR without facing bandwidth constraints from suppressing protests, as CTP previously assessed.[12]

Iranian Domestic and Political Affairs

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

Defense and Armed Forces Logistics Minister Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Ashtiani threatened on September 16 to retaliate against the United States for its decision to unload seized Iranian oil from the *Suez Rajan* tanker. Ashtiani further warned that Iran can disrupt maritime energy trade in the Persian Gulf.[13] The United States unloaded Iranian oil on August 20 off of the *Suez Rajan* tanker it seized in late April.[14] IRGC Navy Commander Rear Admiral Ali Reza Tangsiri similarly threatened on July 20 that Iran would hold the United States and US companies responsible for confiscating and unloading Iranian oil.[15] CTP previously assessed that Iran would likely retaliate by harassing or seizing US commercial and military vessels and personnel in the Gulf.[16]

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IRAN UPDATE, SEPTEMBER 19, 2023

Iran Update, September 19, 2023

Ashka Jhaveri and Amin Soltani

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

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Key Takeaways

1. Iran is expanding its military infrastructure in eastern Syria as part of its effort to secure a permanent presence there.
2. Iranian and Iraqi officials reported on September 19 that Iraq fulfilled its commitment to disarm and relocate anti-Iranian regime Kurdish militias in Iraqi Kurdistan.



Iranian Activities in the Levant

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

Iran is expanding its military infrastructure in eastern Syria as part of its effort to secure a permanent presence there. The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Quds Force plans to build up its Soleimani base near Mayadin into the largest Iranian military base abroad, according to local Syrian reporting. This project supports the Iranian effort to become the dominant power in Deir ez Zor Province in eastern Syria. This project ultimately furthers the long-standing Iranian effort to transform Syria into a platform from which Iran can project military strength and facilitate the transfer of arms and military equipment to its so-called "Axis of Resistance."

- The Soleimani base project involves transferring unspecified weapons from the Imam Ali base near the Iraq-Syria border to the Soleimani base.^[1] The Imam Ali base is currently the largest Iranian military base abroad, which the IRGC built in 2018 and uses to house drones, missiles, and fighters.^[2] The IRGC began building the Soleimani base--also known as the Ain Ali base--in 2022.^[3] It is unclear at this time exactly what military function the base serves. The United States and Israel have both conducted airstrikes on it previously.^[4]
- Iranian leaders instructed the IRGC Quds Force to achieve "total hegemony" in Deir ez Zor Province in May 2023.^[5] The IRGC Quds Force has since then built new military infrastructure in eastern Syria, including drone runways and headquarters, and conducted a series of activities meant to undermine the stability of the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces. These activities also support the Iranian campaign to expel the United States from Syria.
- Iranian leaders have invested tremendous energy, resources, and time since 2011 toward entrenching their military influence throughout Syria and transferring advanced capabilities, such as drones and missiles, there. The deployment of these capabilities throughout Syria diversifies the avenues from which the IRGC can conduct attacks against US and Israeli targets. Iranian leaders also view Syria as one of the principal routes through which they can funnel military arms, equipment, and personnel to Axis of Resistance members in Lebanon and Palestine.

Iranian Activities in Iraq

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

Iranian and Iraqi officials reported on September 19 that Iraq fulfilled its commitment to disarm and relocate anti-Iranian regime Kurdish militias in Iraqi Kurdistan.^[6] Iranian leaders regularly accuse these groups of stoking civil unrest in Ir^[7]an and reached a security agreement with the Iraqi central government to address the matter in March 2023. Iranian leaders threatened to conduct attacks against these groups in Iraqi Kurdistan if Iraqi authorities did not disarm and relocate the groups as part of the agreement by September 19. Iranian and Iraqi officials acknowledging the full implementation of the deal supports CTP's assessment that an Iranian attack into Iraqi Kurdistan is unlikely in the coming days.^[8] CTP also assessed that Iran deployed units from the IRGC Ground Forces to the Iran-Iraq border on September 13 to coerce Iraqi authorities to full implement the agreement.^[9]

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IRAN UPDATE, SEPTEMBER 20, 2023

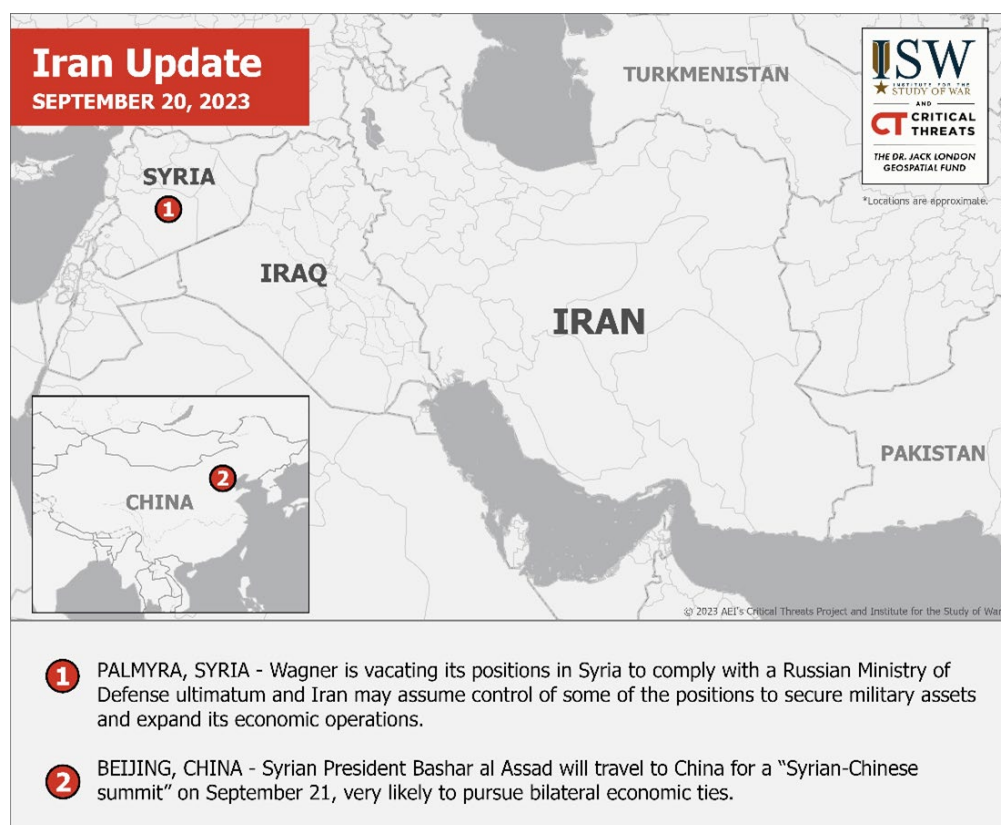
Iran Update, September 20, 2023

Ashka Jhaveri and Andie Parry

The Iran Update provides insights into Iranian and Iranian-sponsored activities abroad that undermine regional stability and threaten US forces and interests. It also covers events and trends that affect the stability and decision-making of the Iranian regime. The Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute and the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) provides these updates weekly on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. For more on developments in Iran and the region, see our [interactive map of Iran and the Middle East](#).

Key Takeaways

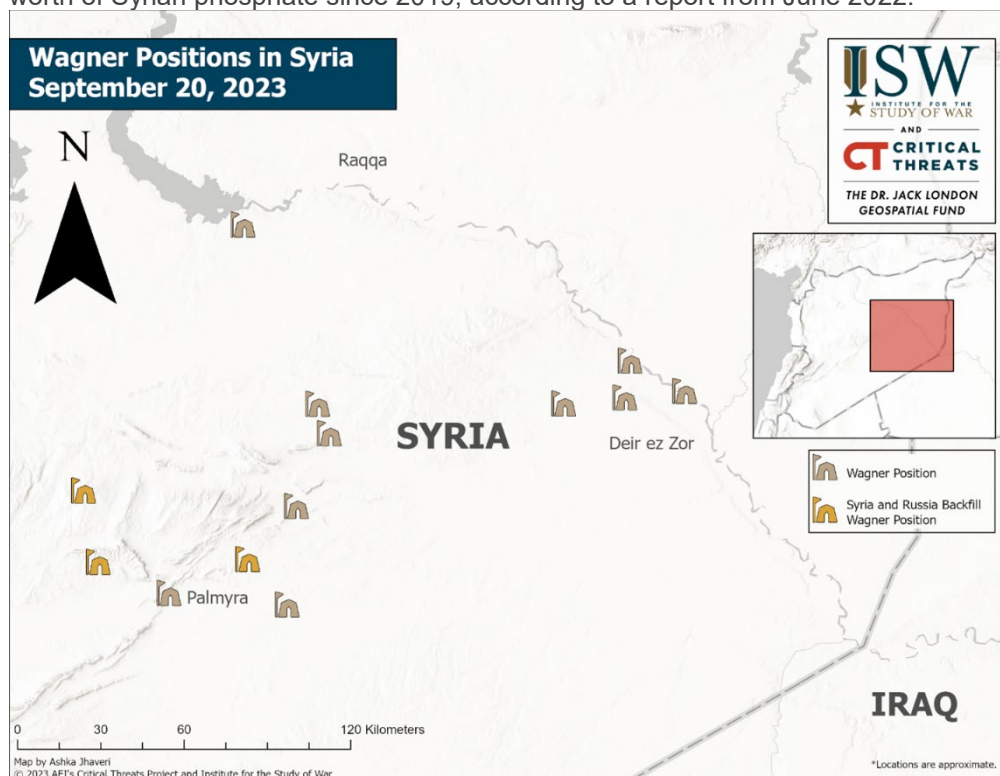
1. Wagner is vacating its positions in Syria to comply with a Russian Ministry of Defense ultimatum. Iran may assume control of some of the positions to secure military assets and expand its economic operations.
2. Syrian President Bashar al Assad will travel to China for a “Syrian-Chinese summit” on September 21, very likely to pursue bilateral economic ties.



Wagner is vacating its positions in Syria to comply with a Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) ultimatum. Iran may assume control of some of the positions to secure military assets and expand its economic operations.[1] The Russian MoD instructed Wagner forces in Syria on August 27 to leave the

country or join the Russian armed forces by September 20.[2] Approximately 1,500 Wagner militants are in Syria, and over 3,000 Syrians work for Wagner.[3] Russian milbloggers claimed on August 27 that from the Wagner point of view, the better option is to transfer assets to Iran rather than to the Russian MoD.[4]

- The Russian Armed Forces are helping the Syrian regime backfill positions near oil and gas fields from which Wagner is leaving.[5] The regime deployed its Military Security Shield militia, units from the Syrian Armed Forces, and National Defense Forces from Sukhna and Homs to oil fields and wells in the central Syrian desert, according to a report on September 20.[6] Russian leaders in Syria agreed to the regime reinforcements, which will replace Wagner-held positions over an unspecified period.[7]
- The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Quds Force expressed interest in poaching Wagner-trained Syrians, notably the ISIS hunters, after the attempted Wagner coup on June 24. The *Wall Street Journal* reported that Wagner's severed chain of command in Syria following the attempted coup left the ISIS hunters in "limbo." [8] Unspecified Iranian officials met with Wagner after the Russian MoD issued the ultimatum to discuss occupying Wagner territories and deposits.[9]
- Wagner's withdrawals from Syria present Iran with an opportunity to secure a permanent and profitable presence there. Iran uses the central Syrian desert area to transfer weapons and military equipment to its proxies across the Levant. Syria has some of the largest known reserves of phosphate, which is a key fertilizer ingredient. Serbia, Ukraine, and four European Union states have imported over \$80 million worth of Syrian phosphate since 2019, according to a report from June 2022.



Syrian President Bashar al Assad will travel to China for a “Syrian-Chinese summit” on September 21, very likely to pursue bilateral economic ties.[10] The Syrian foreign affairs minister and the economy and foreign trade minister will accompany Assad to China, which suggests that the visit will focus on securing Chinese assistance with Syrian reconstruction and initiating Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects in Syria.[11] Syria joined the BRI in January 2022; however, there is no evidence that Syria has initiated a BRI project.[12] No Syrian military personnel are slated to accompany Assad to China, which indicates that military cooperation is not the purpose of the trip. The Chinese Foreign Affairs Ministry declined to comment on the trip.[13]

- China maintained diplomatic relations with Assad throughout the Syrian civil war when many states cut ties with the regime. China has not significantly invested in Syrian reconstruction but has repeatedly expressed willingness to help.[14]
- Assad last visited China in 2004.[15] He has rarely left the Middle East since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war and usually conducted state visits to his military and political backers, Iran, and Russia.[16] The

- exceptions were his visits to Qatar in March 2022 to pursue normalization of ties with the Arab states and Saudi Arabia in May 2023 after Arab states voted to re-admit Syria to the Arab League.[17]
- Assad has signed agreements with both Iran and Russia in 2023 focused on collaboration and reconstruction.[18] Several of those projects have not made progress, however, despite several follow-up meetings.[19] Iranian-led reconstruction contracts have been canceled due to Assad's inability to pay for the services.[20] Russia and Iran have struggling economies and are poorly positioned to further invest in Syrian reconstruction.[21] Assad downplayed the importance of relations with the Arab states relative to Iran and Russia in August, which suggests that he is deemphasizing Arab states as a potential source of investment.[22]

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IRAN UPDATE, SEPTEMBER 22, 2023

Iran Update, September 22, 2023

Ashka Jhaveri, Andie Parry, Johanna Moore, and Brian Carter

The Iran Update provides insights into Iranian and Iranian-sponsored activities abroad that undermine regional stability and threaten US forces and interests. It also covers events and trends that affect the stability and decision-making of the Iranian regime. The Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute and the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) provides these updates weekly on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. For more on developments and in Iran and the region, see our [interactive map of Iran and the Middle East](#).

Key Takeaways

1. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force commander supervised a joint Iranian-Syrian military exercise in Syria on September 21, possibly to advance the campaign to expel US forces from Syria and reassert bilateral military relations.
2. The tribal clashes with the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces have evolved into an insurgency, which likely will facilitate Iran's efforts to establish a grassroots resistance to expel US forces from Syria.
3. A coalition of small Iraqi independent political parties called on the United Nations to prevent tampering in the 2023 Iraqi provincial elections.

Iranian Activities in the Levant

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force commander supervised a joint Iranian-Syrian military exercise in Syria on September 21, possibly to advance Iran's campaign to expel US forces from Syria and reassert military relations with the Syrian regime.^[1] Iranian state media outlet *Tasnim* released images that show soldiers in unmarked uniforms, which suggests that some of the drill participants belonged to Iranian-backed proxy militias. Iranian media did not specify where the exercise took place, but Iran has recently centered its deployments and military development projects around eastern Syria.^[2] Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani supervised artillery and heavy weaponry exercises with Lebanese Hezbollah near the Syrian-Iraqi border, according to the *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights*.^[3] The Iranian media's publicization of the exercise included a statement from Ghaani that "the United States is the main root of corruption, chaos, terrorism, and strife in Syria, the region, and the world."

- An Axis of Resistance Telegram channel stated that this is the first time Iran has published information about a joint military exercise between Syrian and Iran.^[4] Iran and Syria announced plans to hold joint war games in January 2023.^[5] Iran, Russia, and Syria have held joint exercises in eastern Syria since 2019 but have not publicized the exercises nor the Quds Force's role in them.^[6]
- Iranian and Syrian media amplified the rumor that the United States was an imminent threat and would invade eastern Syria in July as part of its joint coercion campaign to expel US forces from Syria.^[7] Iranian officials and Syrian media refuted the rumor in August and September.^[8] This joint exercise demonstrates the coercive campaign is ongoing despite the rhetorical shift from the regimes.
- President Bashar al Assad arrived in China on September 21 for a multiday visit to pursue bilateral economic ties.^[9] Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian affirmed Iranian leaders' intent to maintain a long-term military presence in Syria during a meeting with Syrian President Bashar al Assad in Damascus on August 31.^[10]

The tribal clashes with the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces have evolved into an insurgency, which likely will support Iran's efforts to establish a grassroots resistance to expel US forces from Syria. The SDF and the Deir ez Zor Military Council (DMC) began fighting after the SDF arrested the DMC commander on August 27. The conflict rapidly expanded after August 30, as other tribes joined the fighting driven by long-running grievances against the SDF. Pro-regime forces attempted to prolong the conflict by

deploying forces into SDF-controlled territory in early September.[11] The tribal insurgency is fracturing the US partner force in Syria which is consistent with the pro-regime effort to expel the United States from Syria.[12] Iran, Russia, and the Syrian regime have attempted to create a hostile environment for US forces operating in Syria. Iranian-affiliated “sleeper” cells deployed to SDF-controlled territory to attack US positions and Russian aircraft have harassed US aircraft.

- The tribal insurgency explicitly aims to expel the SDF from Deir ez Zor and establish a governance system led by tribal leaders. Tribal forces attacked SDF forces 17 times between September 6 and September 13, and 16 times between September 14 and September 18.[13] Insurgent leader and Akidat Sheikh Ibrahim al Hifl announced on September 20 his intentions to create a tribal military command affiliated with an unspecified army and Arab tribes.[14] It is not clear if Hifl is referring to the Syrian Arab Army or a separate entity. Pro-regime forces’ involvement in the insurgency would be a major inflection that risks prolonging the conflict.[15]
- The SDF is responding to the tribal insurgency by arbitrarily detaining civilians, abusing locals during operations, and stealing local homes to create military positions.[16] The SDF withdrew on September 13 from several villages that were affected by the initial round of fighting, which enabled tribal insurgents to move freely and conduct attacks in SDF-held southern Deir ez Zor.[17] The SDF’s response will not successfully suppress the insurgency.[18] The steady rate of attacks indicates the SDF’s attempts to appease the tribes on September 7 by releasing prisoners has failed to de-escalate the situation.[19]
- The IRGC Quds Force is forming a tribal militia to strengthen the Arab tribe’s control of SDF-controlled territory and fight SDF forces.[20] The IRGC appointed a former Syrian regime general with ties to tribal sheikhs to recruit tribesmen from regime and SDF-controlled territory, according to a report from a UK-based opposition outlet on September 10.[21] Cultivating an anti-US grassroots resistance movement that conducts attacks on US forces is one component of Iran’s campaign.[22]

Iranian Activities in Iraq

A coalition of small Iraqi independent political parties called on the United Nations to prevent tampering in the 2023 Iraqi provincial elections.[23] The coalition claimed that the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) has been taken over by “two influential parties” degrading the commission’s independence from political influence. The IHEC is Iraq’s independent body for planning and running national elections.[24] Local Iraqi journalists have accused the Shia Coordination Framework of pressuring the former head to resign to appoint the commission’s current head, Judge Abbas al Fatlawi.[25] The coalition’s statement is part of an emerging trend that highlights efforts by the Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and Shia Coordination framework to influence the provincial elections.

- The independent Iraqi news outlet *Al Mada* reported on September 4 that armed factions belonging to Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Ninewa Province are working to prevent political opposition from registering to run in the provincial elections.[26] Ninewa representative Mahma Khalil described Ninewa Province as being overrun by militias, foreign parties, and personal agendas, all of which are seeking to sway local elections.
- Head of the al Fayha Federal Gathering party Karim al Shawak reported that one party candidate, Ammar Sarhan, was arrested on unspecified charges.[27] He suggested that a video clip of Sarhan criticizing the Adil Abdul-Mahdi administration during the 2019 protests prompted the arrest.
- Federal Integrity Commission head and Iranian-backed Badr Organization affiliate Judge Haydar Hanoun announced on September 14 that his commission will audit candidates, their families, and their affiliates for corruption ahead of the elections.[28] ISW previously assessed that Iranian-backed political actors in Iraq could use this audit to disqualify political opponents from running for office under an amendment the Shia Coordination Framework passed in March 2023.[29]

[1] <https://www.dot.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1402/06/30/2959797/%D8%B3%D9%81%D8%B1-%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AF%D9%87-%D9%86%DB%8C%D8%B1%D9%88%DB%8C-%D9%82%D8%AF%D8%B3-%D8%B3%D9%BE%D8%A7%D9%87-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%87-%D8%A8%D8%B1%DA%AF%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%88%D8%B1-%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%AA%D8%B1%DA%A9-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%88-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%87>

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IRAN UPDATE, SEPTEMBER 25, 2023

Iran Update, September 25, 2023

Andie Parry and Ashka Jhaveri

The Iran Update provides insights into Iranian and Iranian-sponsored activities abroad that undermine regional stability and threaten US forces and interests. It also covers events and trends that affect the stability and decision-making of the Iranian regime. The Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute and the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) provides these updates weekly on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. For more on developments and in Iran and the region, see our [interactive map of Iran and the Middle East](#).

Key Takeaways

1. The People's Republic of China and Syria signed several development and technology cooperation agreements on September 22, which may compete with reconstruction agreements that Iran and Syria signed in May.
2. A drone strike near Mayadin City on September 25 caused multiple casualties among the Iranian-affiliated Arab tribesmen who were deploying to Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)-controlled territory in eastern Syria. The deployment of Arab tribesmen to combat the SDF is consistent with ISW's assessment that the tribal insurgency will likely support Iran's efforts to establish a grassroots resistance to expel US forces from Syria.

Iranian Activities in the Levant

The People's Republic of China (PRC) and Syria signed several development and technology cooperation agreements on September 22, which may compete with reconstruction agreements that Iran and Syria signed in May.^[1] Syrian President Bashar al Assad and PRC President Xi Jinping elevated the countries' bilateral relations to a "strategic partnership" on September 22.^[2] Syria was already a member of the Belt and Road Initiative, and the PRC has expressed a willingness to assist in Syrian reconstruction for several years, however.^[3] The PRC has more economic resources than Iran to support reconstruction projects in Syria.

- The establishment of a "strategic partnership" with Syria is a common PRC foreign policy practice. The PRC has strategic partnerships with over 100 states and uses the relationships instead of bilateral treaties to structure its bilateral political and economic relations.^[4] It has "strategic partnerships" or stronger ties across the Middle East and even established a strategic partnership with the Palestinian Authority in June.^[5]
- The strategic partnership with Syria includes economic and reconstruction memoranda of understanding (MOUs) PRC Prime Minister Li Qiang said would provide support for reconstruction and consolidation of stability.^[6] Neither the PRC nor the Syrian regime specified the projects the PRC will support or the amount of money they entail, however.
- Iran and Syria signed MOUs covering oil, energy, transportation, reconstruction, and communications technology in May 2023 and have since held several follow up meetings.^[7] Iran is particularly interested in developing a rail link through Iraq and Syria to the Mediterranean.^[8]

The Syrian regime will continue to rely on Iran and Russia for military support. Xi and Assad have not released any security cooperation announcements, nor did Syrian military officials accompany Assad to China.^[9] Iran, however, has built up a large military footprint in Syria, as ISW has previously reported.^[10] Iran reasserted its military commitment to Syria on September 21 during a joint Iran-Syria military exercise led by commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force.^[11] Russia has

also remained active in Syria despite the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and has provided critical air support to regime forces in the conflict against rebels in Idlib Province.^[12]

A drone strike that destroyed a bridge near Mayadin City on September 25 caused multiple casualties among the Iranian-affiliated Arab tribesmen who were deploying to Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)-controlled territory in eastern Syria, according to Syrian opposition media.^[13] The tribesmen were crossing the bridge to support the Arab tribes' fight against the US-backed SDF, which has been ongoing since mid-August and has developed into an insurgency that is fracturing the SDF.^[14] ISW previously reported that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force is forming a tribal militia to strengthen the Arab tribe's control of SDF-controlled territory and fight SDF forces.^[15] The deployment of Arab tribesmen to combat the SDF is consistent with ISW's assessment that the tribal insurgency will likely support Iran's efforts to establish a grassroots resistance to expel US forces from Syria.

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IRAN UPDATE, SEPTEMBER 27, 2023

Iran Update, September 27, 2023

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

The Iran Update provides insights into Iranian and Iranian-sponsored activities abroad that undermine regional stability and threaten US forces and interests. It also covers events and trends that affect the stability and decision-making of the Iranian regime. The Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute and the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) provides these updates weekly on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. For more on developments and in Iran and the region, see our [interactive map of Iran and the Middle East](#).

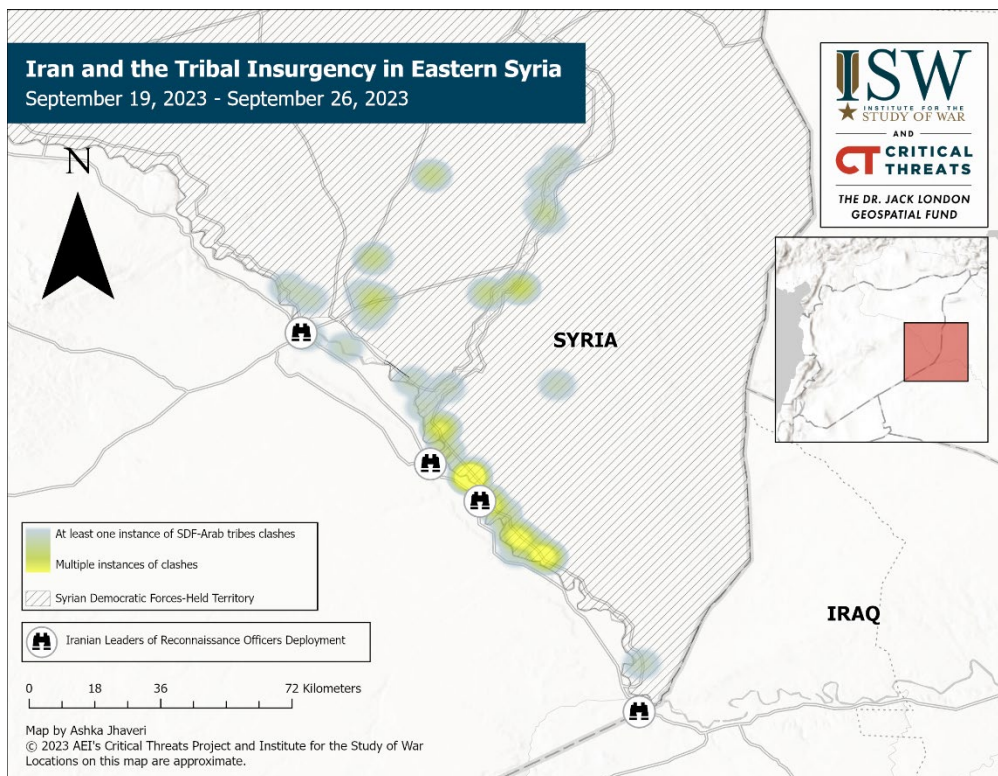
Key Takeaways

1. Iran deployed 50 reconnaissance officers to eastern Syria that could support Iranian efforts to prolong conflict between the SDF and Arab tribes and Operational security for Iranian and Iranian-backed forces, convoys, and positions.
2. Iran's Deputy Oil Minister Jalil Salari announced on September 25 that Iran, Syria, and Venezuela had signed a memorandum of understanding to build a new oil refinery in Syria, likely to aid the Iranian economy and further solidify Iran's economic influence over the Syrian regime.
3. Senior Iranian and Russian military officials reviewed Iranian advanced conventional weapons in Moscow and Tehran in August and September 2023, and may conclude a drone and missile sale agreement following the expiration of UN missile restrictions on October 18.

Iranian Activities in the Levant

Iran deployed 50 reconnaissance officers to eastern Syria as it pursues multiple operations to secure military assets, conduct counter terrorism operations, and expel the United States from Syria. The reconnaissance officers deployed to four major cities on September 26 in eastern Syria with unspecified orders, according to local opposition media.[1] The deployments could support the following ongoing Iranian lines of effort in eastern Syria.

- **Prolonging conflict between the SDF and Arab tribes.** ISW has reported on how the Iranian-backed militias are contributing to the fracturing of the coalition between the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the Arab tribes in Deir ez Zor Province.[2]
- **Conducting counter terrorism operations.** Iran and pro-regime forces conduct regular counter terrorism operations to secure the central Syrian desert and major roads.[3]
- **Operational security for Iranian and Iranian-backed forces, convoys, and positions.** Iran regularly secures its ground line of communication following threats to their positions.[4][5][6][7]



Pro-regime forces are taking advantage of a hostile environment toward the SDF. They have launched attacks and conducted sabotage in SDF-controlled territory in late August and early September. These actions are consistent with the coordinated campaign that Iran, Russia, and the Syrian regime began forming in November 2022 to expel the United States from Syria. The 50 reconnaissance officers could advance the pro-regime forces' efforts to fracture the SDF.

Pro-regime forces are harboring tribal fighters in eastern Syria amid a tribal insurgency against the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The Syrian regime and Iranian-backed militias ordered their forces not to harm the tribal forces in Deir ez Zor Province.[8] Another report says the regime is allowing tribal forces to enter its territory so long as they return to fight the SDF, which suggests the regime is offering a area for tribal forces to recuperate.[9] This is a change from early September, when local regime security services were arresting people displaced during the SDF-tribal.[10] The pro-regime forces' decision to allow tribes to enter regime-controlled territory suggests that the regime is attempting to build trust with the tribal forces. The harboring of Arab tribesmen to prolong conflict with the SDF is consistent with ISW's assessment that the tribal insurgency will likely support Iran's efforts to establish a grassroots resistance to expel US forces from Syria.

ISW previously reported that pro-regime forces are pursuing multiple lines of effort to prolong conflict between the SDF and Arab tribes to threaten the US force presence in Syria. This includes forming a tribal militia to strengthen the Arab tribe's control of SDF-controlled territory and fight SDF forces, directing forces to conduct assassination attacks, and sending medical aid and weapons into SDF-controlled territory.

Iran's Deputy Oil Minister Jalil Salari announced on September 25 that Iran, Syria, and Venezuela had signed a memorandum of understanding to build a new oil refinery in Syria, likely to aid the Iranian economy and further solidify Iran's economic influence over the Syrian regime. Iran and Venezuela will export crude oil to the new refinery that is planned to process 140,000 barrels per day (bpd).[11] Salari also announced Iranian engineers and companies would repair an existing oil refinery in Homs Province that was destroyed in the Syrian Civil War, adding another 100,000 bpd to Syria's refinement capacity.

- Iran does not have sufficient domestic oil infrastructure to refine its internal and export needs and plans to upgrade facilities domestically.[12] Iran is also looking to extraterritorial refinement to support its refining needs.[13] Extraterritorial refinement would allow Iran to boost its export capacity. Iranian oil exports have reached near pre-sanctions levels in the past months.[14]

- The Iranian assistant oil minister stated the refinery upgrades will supply fuel to the Axis of Resistance.[15] Syria is currently facing an oil shortage and protests erupted in August after the Assad regime cut fuel subsidies.[16] The IRGC and Iranian-backed militias in eastern Syria have enraged locals by hoarding the limited gas supplies for their headquarters and military operations.[17] Iranian-backed militias also extract oil from eastern Syria but are hindered by low refinement capacity.[18]
- Iran and Venezuela signed several oil-related agreements during Iranian President Ibrahim Raisi's visit to Caracas in June.[19] Iran and Venezuela have not collaborated on oil projects in third-party countries, however.

Iran-Russia Relations

Senior Iranian and Russian military officials reviewed Iranian advanced conventional weapons in Moscow and Tehran in August and September 2023, and may conclude a drone and missile sale agreement following the expiration of UN missile restrictions on October 18. Russian Defense Minister General Sergei Shoigu traveled to Tehran on September 19 to discuss strengthening bilateral defense and military cooperation with Iran. IRGC Aerospace Force Commander Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajji Zadeh guided Shoigu on a tour of Iran's drone, missile, and air defense arsenal at the IRGC Aerospace Force (IRGCASF) Headquarters in Tehran on September 20. Shoigu also discussed the expiration of UNSCR 2231's missile restrictions with Iranian Defense Minister Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Ashtiani on September 20.[20] UNSCR 2231 is the UN Security Council resolution endorsing the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement, which suspended nuclear-related UN sanctions and established sunset dates for missile and other arms-related sanctions on Iran.[21] The expiration of UNSCR 2231's missile restrictions in October will empower Iran to export missiles and missile-related technology without international oversight, providing Iran with an opportunity to fill Russian needs.

- Hajji Zadeh showcased the *Paveh* cruise missile, 358 surface-to-air missile, *Ababil*, and *Fattah* missile, among other military equipment, during Shoigu's visit to the IRGCASF facility.[22] Ashtiani stated on September 5 that the Defense Ministry is ready to develop defense and strategic relations with "all independent and aligned countries" following the expiration of UNSCR 2231's missile restrictions.[23] Ashtiani highlighted the kinds of military equipment, including various ballistic and cruise missiles, which the Defense Ministry produces. American and British officials warned in December 2022 that Iran was going transfer missiles to Russia to address its depleted stockpile.[24]
- Hajizadeh showcased a new Shahed-136 drone launcher during Shoigu's visit to the IRGCASF facility on September 20. Iranian military officials frequently advertise the capabilities of Iranian drones and boast about the high number of countries wishing to purchase these drones. Former IRGC Commander Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi boasted in October 2022 that 22 countries—including Algeria, Armenia, Serbia, Tajikistan, and Venezuela—had submitted formal requests for Iranian drones.[25] Armed Forces General Staff Chief Major General Mohammad Bagheri similarly stated on September 18 that Iran has received more orders for its drones than it can produce and noted that "major world powers" are vying to purchase Iranian weapons.[26] Iran is incapable of developing and manufacturing certain subsystems and components for its drones, procuring engines and micro-electronics from abroad. Iran has, nevertheless, successfully developed a domestic-production base for a variety of short and long-range attack and reconnaissance drones.[27] CTP previously reported that Iran seeks to increase defense exports.[28] President Ebrahim Raisi promoted Iranian drone technology during his trip to Kenya in July 2023.[29] CTP additionally assessed that Iran may seek to supply Bolivia with drones as part of a memorandum of understanding it signed with Bolivia in July 2023.[30]
- The Biden administration revealed in May 2023 that Russia is seeking to acquire more drones from Iran after using most of the 400 drones it previously bought from Iran.[31] Iran is also helping Russia construct a drone manufacturing facility in Yelabuga, Russia, which would make significantly increase Russia's drone stockpile and aid its war effort in Ukraine.[32]
- UNSCR 2231's missile restrictions ban Iran from exporting missiles with a range of 300 kilometers or more.[33] Ukrainian and Israeli intelligence reports indicate that Russia seeks to acquire Iran's *Fateh*-110 and *Zolfaghar* ballistic missiles, both of which have ranges of 300 kilometers or more.[34] Shoigu visited the Iranian booth at the Russian military exposition in Moscow in August, during which Iranian officials showcased a variety of Iranian missile systems, including the *Zolfaghar*. [35] Unidentified Iranian officials

told Western media in October 2022 that Iran and Russia had reached a deal for Iran to provide Russia with surface-to-surface missiles, including the *Zolfaghar* missile, in addition to more drones.[36] Ukrainian military officials have additionally noted on multiple occasions that Russia has depleted its missile stockpile during its invasion of Ukraine.[37] American and British officials warned in December 2022 that Russia attempting to acquire Iranian missiles to address its acute shortage.[38] Shoigu's visit to Tehran is part of a broader trend of Russo-Iranian defense industrial interactions in recent weeks. Iranian Defense Ministry officials showcased miniature replicas of a variety of Iranian air defense systems, drones, and missiles at a Russian military exposition in Moscow in August 2023.[39] The officials displayed a miniature replica of the Ababil ballistic missile for the first time. Hajji Zadeh subsequently showcased a life-size Ababil missile during Shoigu's visit to the IRGC Aerospace Force Headquarters on September 20.[40]

Below is a table of some of the ballistic, cruise, anti-tank, and air defense missile systems Iranian officials have most frequently discussed or showcased to Russian officials since fall 2022:[41]

Name	Type	Maximum Range	Payload	Accuracy
<i>Sadid-365</i>	ATGM	8 km	8.4 kg	Guidance system and accuracy rate unknown[42]
<i>Almas</i>	ATGM	4-8 km	6.8-14 kg	Infrared vector image guidance system; accuracy rate unknown[43]
<i>Toofan</i>	ATGM	3.5-3.85 km	3.6-6.14 kg	SACLOS guidance system; 95 % accuracy rate[44]
<i>Ababil</i>	CRBM	86 km	45 kg	Optical seeker guidance system; CEP unknown[45]
<i>Zolfaghar</i> *	SRBM	700 km	350-500 kg	GNSS guidance system; 10-100 m CEP[46]
<i>Raad-500 (aka Zuhair or Zohair)*</i>	SRBM	500 km	350 kg	GNSS and INS guidance; 30 - 100 m CEP[47]
<i>Fattah</i> *	MRBM	1,400 km	350-450 kg	MaRV; GNSS and INS guidance; 10-25 m CEP[48]
<i>Paveh</i> *	LACM	1,650 km	Unknown	Unknown[49]

Iran possesses the largest and most diverse missile arsenal in the Middle East having heavily invested in the program over the past five to seven years.[55] Iran has transferred missiles to its proxies across the region, demonstrating its production capabilities can address both domestic and foreign need.[56] Iran is still dependent on foreign suppliers for certain missile-related ingredients, components, and equipment.[57] A large number of MODAFL-connected organizations have successfully enabled the regime's foreign procurement of missile systems, associated technologies, and materials, however.[58] The expiration of UNSCR 2231's missile restrictions in October will enable these government-connected entities to more easily procure missile-related technology, goods, and materials without international oversight.[59] Western media reported in April that Iran is engaged in secret negotiations with China and Russia to acquire a Chinese supply of Ammonium Perchlorate for its solid-fueled missiles.[60] Western media speculated that the purpose of the agreement would be to enable Iran to provide solid-fueled ballistic missiles to Russia. This would make the *Tondar-69*, *Dezful*, *Shahid Haj Qassem*, *Sajjil-1/-2*, *Fattah*, *Zolfaghar*, and other *Fateh* family solid-fueled ballistic missiles candidates for transfer to Russia. Ukrainian and Israeli intelligence reports have specified that Russia seeks to acquire Iran's *Fateh*-110 and *Zolfaghar* ballistic missiles.[61] Iran showcased the *Zolfaghar* and the *Raad*-500 (both solid-fueled *Fateh* variants) at the Russian military exposition in Moscow in August.[62]

The European decision to violate UNSCR 2231's missile-restriction sunset clause could further incentivize Iran to sell missiles to Russia. Britain, France, and Germany (known collectively as the E3), announced on September 14 that they would retain the existing missile restrictions on Iran past the October 18 sunset.[63] The E3 will transfer the restrictions into domestic law and the EU will maintain its existing missile restrictions alongside all its other remaining sanctions. The Iranian Foreign Affairs Ministry characterized the decision as "provocative" and denounced it as a violation of UNSCR 2231 and the corresponding 2015 nuclear agreement.[64] President Ebrahim Raisi stated during his address to the UN General Assembly that the decision had put Iran and Europe on the path toward confrontation.[65] Ashtiani told Shoigu during their meeting on September 20 that the European decision violates the nuclear agreement, potentially signaling to Russia that Iran is no longer bound by nuclear deal-related considerations.[66] The potential for European noncompliance with the nuclear agreement had previously restrained Iran from selling missiles to Russia, as CTP reported.[67] Iran has regularly violated UNSCR 2231's missile restrictions since the 2015 nuclear deal's inception due to an absence of enforcement mechanisms and the resolution's vague definition of "nuclear-capable" missiles.[68] The European restrictions, nevertheless, impose greater practical limitations on Iranian missile proliferation than the expiring UN restrictions as they restrict "all types" of weaponry and ballistic missile-related technology to Iran and designate more than 300 individual and entities connected to Iran's missile program compared to UNSCR 2231's 84 individuals and entities.[69]

The European decision, nevertheless, means that none of the signatories to the 2015 nuclear deal are now abiding by it. Western media reports also demonstrate that negotiations to revive the agreement are similarly failing.[70] The failure of the nuclear deal and subsequent negotiations to revive it leaves Iran with fewer options for generating much needed economic relief, including revenue from arms sales. The 2015 agreement had partially lifted international economic sanctions on Iran.

Iran could seek to acquire cash from Russia in return for supplying Russia with missiles. The British Secret Intelligence Service revealed in July 2023 that Iran seeks to acquire cash from Russia in return for Iranian drones. Iran is currently facing poor economic conditions, with the value of the rial hovering around 494,000 rials to one US dollar on September 27.[71] The Iran Statistical Center reported on September 25 that Iran's inflation rate is approximately 46.1 percent.[72] CTP previously reported that Iran is seeking to leverage arms sales to generate revenue for the Iranian economy.[73]

Revenues from missile sales to Russia are unlikely to have a serious impact on the Iranian economy as they will not solve the problems that underlie the country's economic instability. Fundamental economic reforms—such as reducing the dominance of para-statal organizations in Iran's economy and combatting corruption and nepotism—would be necessary to meaningfully improve Iran's economy. Iran's efforts to expand commercial and economic ties with regional and extra-regional countries will have a more meaningful impact on the Iranian economy than revenues from arms sales would. The Raisi administration has doubled down on its economic diplomacy efforts in recent months, as CTP has previously reported.[74]

Iran could seek further Russian assistance with its own missile and Space Launch Vehicle (SLV) programs in return for missile sales to Russia. CIA Director William Burns stated on July 20 that Russian technicians are assisting with the Iranian SLV and missile program inside Iran.[75] Iran is developing its SLVs with lift capacity and boosters that could be capable of reaching inter-continental ballistic missile (ICBM) ranges, potentially reaching the United States, if they were reconfigured, according to the DIA.[76] Advancing Iran's space program would contribute to its development of ICBMs because SLVs use similar technologies. Iran can also use SLVs to launch satellites capable of collecting imagery and maintain an updated target bank for attacks abroad.[77] Iranian state media has reported that the IRGC used launched satellites to collect intelligence on US military positions in the region.[78] Russia, furthermore, launched a Kanopus-V satellite—alternatively referred to as the “Khayyam” in Iran—into orbit on behalf of Iran in August 2022.[79]

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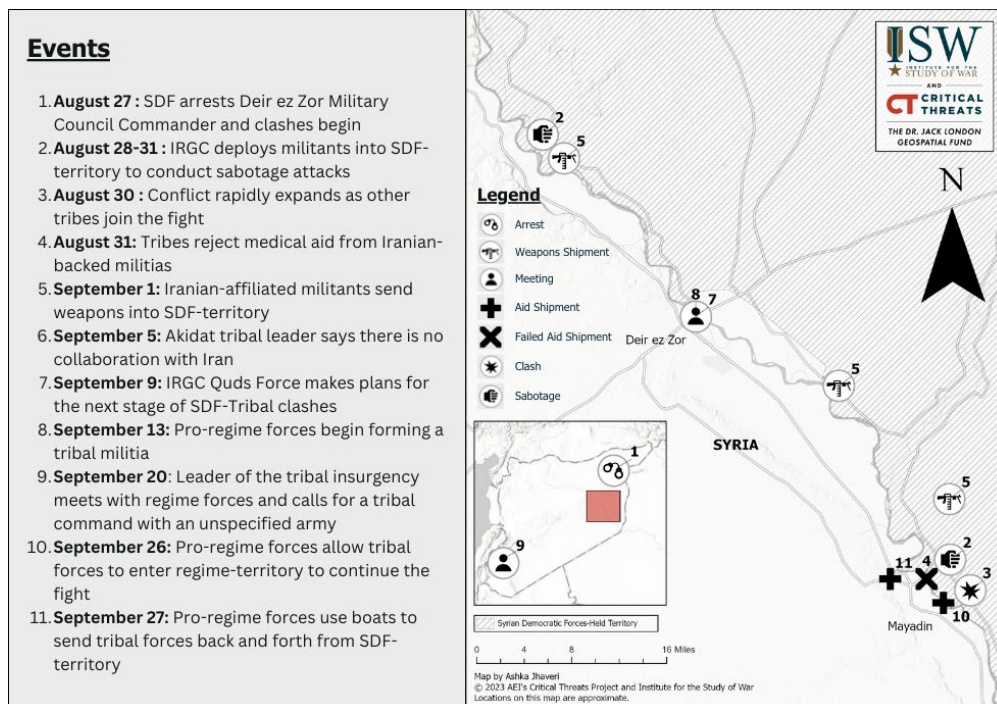
Iran Update, September 29, 2023

Ashka Jhaveri

The Iran Update provides insights into Iranian and Iranian-sponsored activities abroad that undermine regional stability and threaten US forces and interests. It also covers events and trends that affect the stability and decision-making of the Iranian regime. The Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute and the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) provides these updates weekly on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. For more on developments and in Iran and the region, see our [interactive map of Iran and the Middle East](#).

Pro-regime forces are helping the Arab tribes sustain their fight against the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which may facilitate the expulsion of the SDF from parts of their territory. The coalition between the SDF and Arab tribes in Deir ez Zor Province is fracturing amid clashes over long-standing grievances. The tribal insurgency explicitly aims to expel the SDF from Deir ez Zor and establish a governance system led by tribal leaders. Insurgent leader Ibrahim al Hifl said on September 14 that the insurgents aimed to manage the region through the tribes and its “uprising” will not stop until the SDF is expelled.[1] Pro-regime forces immediately seized the opportunity to threaten the SDF by sending forces into SDF-controlled territory after the arrest of a local leader which triggered the clashes on August 27.[2] Since then, regime forces have attempted to prolong conflict in SDF-controlled territory and even redirect grievances toward the US-led International Coalition.[3] Pro-regime support to the tribes to prolong the conflict with the SDF supports the coordinated campaign that Iran, Russia, and the Syrian regime began forming in November 2022 to expel the United States from Syria.

- Tribal fighters initially rejected medical aid from pro-regime forces on August 31.[4] Leader of the Akidat tribe Musab al Hifl said in a statement on September 5 that there is no collaboration between the Arab tribes and Iran or Turkey.[5] Tribal fighters have since begun receiving aid from pro-regime forces, however. The SDF seized Iranian anti-tank rockets from tribal forces on September 25.[6]
- Regime forces began arresting people who crossed from SDF-controlled territory on September 10 on charges of affiliation with opposition forces but ended the policy on September 26. The regime is now providing Arab tribesmen fleeing the fighting with an area to recuperate, on the condition that they return to fight the SDF. [7] A report from a UK-based outlet noted on September 27 that the regime is driving tribal forces in small boats to and from SDF-controlled territory.[8]
- Al Hifl met with a Syrian Arab Army general in Damascus on September 20.[9] Hifl announced the formation of a tribal command on the same day involving an unspecified army.[10] It is not clear if Hifl is referring to the Syrian Arab Army or a separate entity. Pro-regime armed forces direct involvement in the insurgency would be a major inflection that risks prolonging the conflict.[11] Hifl is attempting to broaden his support base by appealing for support from “the people of the Euphrates” and calling for the return of Arab heritage to Deir ez Zor. A tribal command comprised of various anti-SDF elements would facilitate greater cohesion.



Pro-regime actors seized an opportunity to attack SDF forces when fighting broke out in late August. Tribal forces initially rejected support from pro-regime actors. Insurgent leader Ibrahim al Hifl met with senior regime military officials on September 20 and called for the formation of a tribal command. Regime forces began assisting tribal forces in the days following the meeting.

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