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Iran Update, August 1, 2023

Iran Update, August 1, 2023

Annika Ganzeveld, Amin Soltani, and Andie Parry

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) Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and Shin Bet announced it thwarted the smuggling of “anomalous” weapons from northern Jordan into Israel during the early morning of July 25, a day after judicial reform prompted significant unrest in Israel.
- 2) Iranian state media and officials are falsely claiming that the United States has resumed its campaign to destabilize Syria by sponsoring terrorist groups. The claims are consistent with recent Russo-Iranian information operations to support their coercive campaign to expel US forces from Syria.
- 3) Iran is pursuing the construction of drone factories in Belarus and Russia, which will help Russia acquire Iranian drones more readily and provide Iran with numerous economic and military benefits.

Iran Update | August 1, 2023



- 1). ISRAEL-JORDAN BORDER - Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and Shin Bet announced it thwarted the smuggling of “anomalous” weapons from northern Jordan into Israel during the early morning of July 25, a day after judicial reform prompted significant unrest in Israel.
- 2). TEHRAN - Iranian state media and officials are falsely claiming that the United States has resumed its campaign to destabilize Syria by sponsoring terrorist groups. The claims are consistent with recent Russo-Iranian information operations to support their coercive campaign to expel US forces from Syria.
- 3). TEHRAN - Iran is pursuing the construction of drone factories in Belarus and Russia, which will help Russia acquire Iranian drones more readily and provide Iran with numerous economic and military benefits.

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.

Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and Shin Bet announced it thwarted the smuggling of “anomalous” weapons from northern Jordan into Israel during the early morning of July 25, a day after judicial reform prompted significant unrest in Israel.[1] The specified weapons were destined for groups in the West Bank.[2] Israel issued a gag order to prevent Israeli media from publishing additional details.[3] Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant announced a day after the weapons seizure became public that Israel would build a wall on the northern Jordan border to interdict weapons smuggling as Iran intensifies its efforts to arm Palestinian groups and gather intelligence.[4]

Iran and Axis of Resistance groups have paid close attention to protests in Israel, suggesting that they aim to exploit the unrest stemming from the judicial reform outcome.[5] Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force and Hamas leadership held a meeting in mid-July to strategize capitalizing on Israeli unrest, ultimately deciding against direct interference, according to Reuters.[6] The smuggling of “anomalous” weapons into northern Israel during is consistent with CTP’s previous hypothesis that Iran could capitalize on unrest to re-arm militants in the West Bank.[7] The Jenin branch of Hamas announced it built and deployed explosively formed penetrators against IDF soldiers in early July, demonstrating that Palestinian groups are developing military capabilities.[8] Iranian leaders have stressed the importance of cultivating an armed resistance in the West Bank.[9] Iran has the option to use the new military capacity to direct future actions against Israel.

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 state media and officials are falsely claiming that the United States has resumed its campaign to destabilize Syria by sponsoring terrorist groups. Supreme National Security Council Secretary Rear Admiral Ali Akbar Ahmadian stated that the July 27 ISIS attack in Damascus demonstrated that the United States is reviving terrorist organizations in Syria to undermine the country's political stability and security during a meeting with his Syrian counterpart Faisal Mekdad in Tehran on August 1.[10] Ahmadian further claimed that the United States has resumed this effort because it failed to achieve its objectives during the Syrian civil war. Mekdad also emphasized that the United States seeks to revive terrorist cells to destabilize Syria. State-owned *Al Alam* similarly claimed on August 1 that the American military presence in Syria is destabilizing the country and that the recent ISIS attack in Damascus was part of "a US-created scenario." [11]

The above claims are consistent with recent Russo-Iranian information operations to support their coercive campaign to expel US forces from Syria. Iran and Russia amplified rumors of International Coalition attacks into Syrian regime territory throughout July, as CTP previously reported.[12] Iranian-backed militias have similarly framed the US-led international coalition as an imminent security threat to Syrians, as CTP previously reported.[13] Russia accused the United States of preparing false flag chemical weapons attacks against Syria on July 3.[14] Iranian-backed militias and Syrian regime forces also reinforced their positions in Deir ez Zor and the Syrian desert near the Al Tanf Deconfliction Zone close to US deployments throughout July, as CTP previously reported.[15] A US senior defense official stated on July 14 that Iran, Russia, and Syria are cooperating to pressure the US to withdraw forces from Syria.[16] Russian President Vladimir Putin stated on July 30 that Russia is not seeking a confrontation with the United States in Syria but is prepared for "any scenario" after several weeks of Russian violations of US airspace and aggressive maneuvers endangering US aircraft in Syria.[17]

Iran is pursuing the construction of drone factories in Belarus and Russia, which will help Russia acquire Iranian drones more readily and provide Iran with numerous economic and military benefits. Armed Forces General Staff Chief Major General Mohammad Bagheri called for greater defense industry cooperation between Iran and Belarus during a meeting with Belarusian Defense Minister Lieutenant General Viktor Khrenin in Tehran on August 1.[18] Iranian Defense and Armed Forces Logistics Minister Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Ashtiani signed a military cooperation agreement with Khrenin on July 31.[19] CTP assessed that Ashtiani and Khrenin may have discussed establishing Shahed kamikaze drone factories in Belarus to support the Russian invasion of Ukraine.[20] Ukraine claimed in May 2023 that Iranian engineers are exploring how to convert factories in Gomel, Belarus into drone production facilities.[21] The Biden administration revealed in June that Iran is helping Russia build a drone manufacturing factory in Yelabuga, Tatarstan, Russia.[22] Iran opened an Ababil-2 drone factory in Dushanbe, Tajikistan in May 2022. Bagheri notably attended the opening ceremony of this factory.[23] The production of Iranian drones in Belarus and Russia will benefit both Russia and Iran:

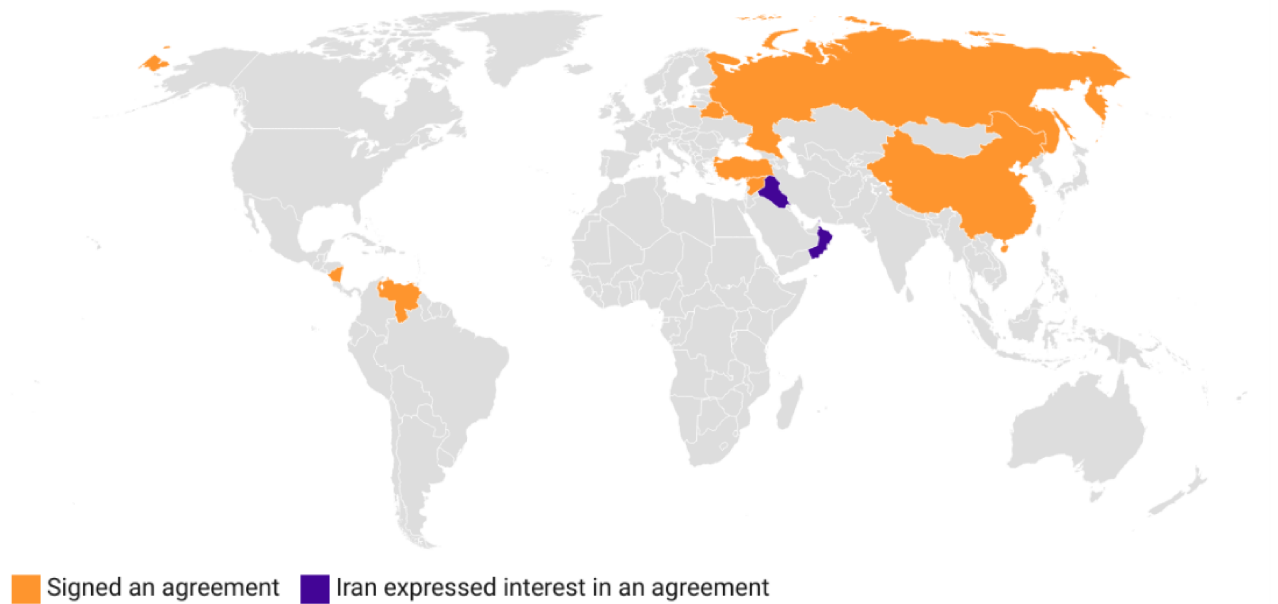
- Russia will benefit by acquiring Iranian drones for its invasion of Ukraine more readily. Israeli and Ukrainian media have noted that the construction of an Iranian drone factory in Belarus would alleviate the "logistical problems" Russia faces in transporting Iranian drones from Iran to Russia via the Middle East.[24] The Biden administration published a map in June showing Iranian drone transfers from Iran to Russia through the Caspian Sea.[25]
- Iran will benefit by receiving revenue for the Iranian economy. The British Secret Intelligence Service revealed in July that Iran seeks to acquire cash from Russia in return for Iranian drones.[26] Iran is currently facing critical economic conditions, with the value of the rial surpassing 500,000 rials to one US dollar on August 1.[27] The Iran Statistical Center reported on July 25 that Iran's inflation rate is approximately 47.5

percent.[28]

- Russia can also benefit Iran militarily. Western media speculated in late 2022 that Iran might receive Russian Su-35 fighter jets in return for supplying Russia with drones. [29] Iranian military officials have increasingly expressed skepticism at receiving Su-35s in recent months, however.[30] Western media reported in March that Russia provided Iran with advanced surveillance software and cyber weapons in exchange for drones.[31] A high-ranking Israeli military official separately expressed concern in June that Russia is providing Iran with Western weapons captured in Ukraine.[32]

Iran's close cooperation with Belarus and Russia may stem, in part, because Iran has signed long-term strategic agreements with these countries. The graphic below depicts which countries Iran has signed or is pursuing cooperation agreements with.

Iran: Strategic Agreements with Partner States



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

Iran Update, August 2, 2023

Iran Update, August 2, 2023

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

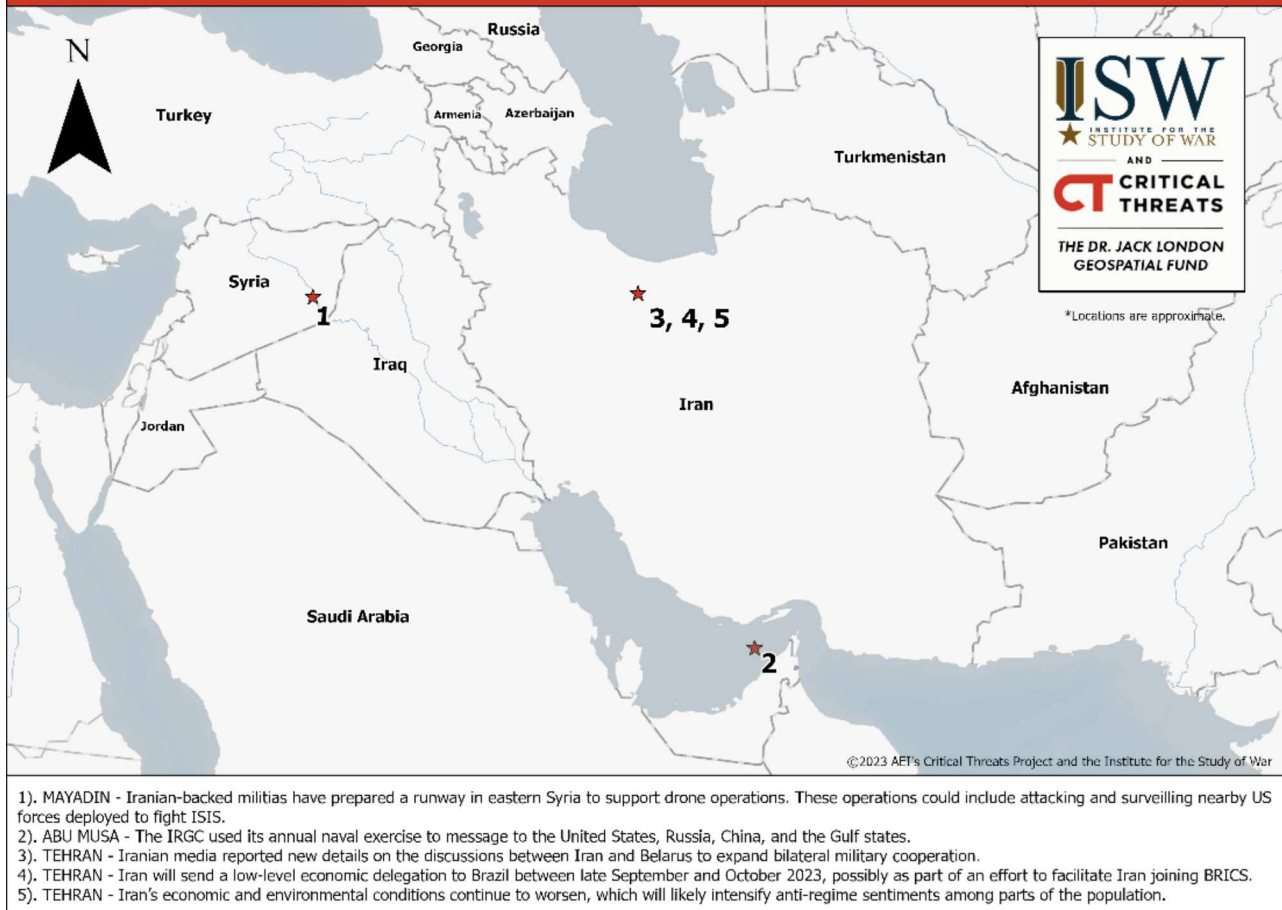
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Key Takeaways

1. Iranian-backed militias have prepared a runway in eastern Syria to support drone operations. These operations could include attacking and surveilling nearby US forces deployed to fight ISIS.
2. The IRGC used its annual naval exercise to message to the United States, Russia, China, and the Gulf states.
3. Iranian media reported new details on the discussions between Iran and Belarus to expand bilateral military cooperation. Iranian and Belarusian officials have discussed conducting joint exercises and establishing military attachés in both countries.
4. Iran will send a low-level economic delegation to Brazil between late September and October 2023, possibly as part of an effort to facilitate Iran joining BRICS.
5. Iran's economic and environmental conditions continue to worsen, which will likely intensify anti-regime sentiments among parts of the population. Iranian leaders are publicly discussing approaches to more effectively confront social unrest in response to anti-regime frustrations.

Iran Update | August 2, 2023



Iranian Activities in the Levant

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

Iranian-backed militias have prepared a runway in eastern Syria to support drone operations. These operations could include attacking and surveilling nearby US forces deployed to fight ISIS. The UK-based, anti-Syrian regime outlet *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights* reported the militias prepared the runway in farmland near Mayadin on August 1.

[1] Lebanese Hezbollah trained Iranian-backed militias in Mayadin on operating the Iranian-made Ababil-3 on June 12.[2] The Ababil-3 is a multirole drone that requires a runway to launch and can fire guided anti-tank missiles as well as guided glide bombs.[3] The possibility that Iranian-backed militias will use these drones to attack and/or surveil US positions is plausible because they have previously used drones for such purposes in Syria.[4]

Iran's preparation of the runway in eastern Syria may be in support of the Iranian-Russian-Syrian regime campaign to expel the United States from Syria. Syrian regime-opposition media reported that IRGC, Russian, and Syrian regime leaders met at the Russian-operated Hmeimim base in Latakia in July 2023 to discuss perceived threats posed by US forces in Syria.[5] The Hmeimim base is Russia's largest operational military base in Syria, which suggests senior leadership is taking note of the developments in eastern Syria.[6] The meeting followed a surge of pro-Syrian regime forces to eastern Syria in early July and several information operations framing the US-led International Coalition as an imminent threat to locals. The preparation of a drone runway is consistent with Russian and Iranian efforts to create optimal conditions to attack.[7] CTP has observed Iran preparing to resume its campaign to expel US forces from the Middle East since

early June. Comments from a senior US defense official on July 14 about growing ties between Iran, Russia, and Syria across the Middle East are consistent with CTP's observations.[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.

The IRGC used its annual naval exercise to message to the United States, Russia, China, and the Gulf states. The IRGC Navy held one of its annual naval exercises on the island of Abu Musa on August 2.[9] The IRGC Navy also announced that it mounted newly acquired missiles on surface vessels responsible for protecting the islands of Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs in the Persian Gulf.[10] The IRGC Navy holds one of its several annual exercises at the beginning of August on Abu Musa, contrary to Western media reporting that this was a surprise naval drill.[11] IRGC Commander Major General Hossein Salami stated on the sidelines of the exercise that Iran is committed to protecting its territorial integrity and establishing regional security without the destabilizing involvement of foreigners, specifically mentioning the United States and Israel.[12] IRGC Navy Commander Rear Admiral Ali Reza Tangsiri similarly stated that Iran will strongly defend its territorial integrity.[13]

- The IRGC sought to demonstrate its naval capabilities in response to a buildup of US forces around the Persian Gulf in recent weeks. The US has sent a naval destroyer, fighter jets, and Marine units in response to Iranian threats to commercial shipping around the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz.[14] Iranian leaders have issued threats in response to the buildup.[15] They also showcased their Abu Mehdi land attack cruise missile (LACM) on July 25 to signal Iran's longer-range naval capabilities.[16] Iran uses LACMs, among other systems, as part of its anti-access/area denial strategy meant to prevent enemies from entering or operating freely off the Iranian coast.[17]
- The IRGC sought to assert Iranian control over disputed territories in the Persian Gulf. Iran seized the islands of Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs in 1971 shortly after the British withdrawal from the area. China and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) published a joint statement calling for negotiations between Iran and the UAE over the three Iranian-controlled islands in December 2022.[18] Russia and the GCC countries similarly issued a joint statement calling for negotiations over the islands on July 10.[19] Iranian officials have responded by condemning both statements and summoning the Chinese and Russian ambassadors to the Foreign Affairs Ministry.[20]

Iranian media reported new details on the discussions between Iran and Belarus to expand bilateral military cooperation. Armed Forces General Staff Chief (AFGS) Major General Mohammad Bagheri and Belarusian Defense Minister Lieutenant General Viktor Khrenin discussed conducting joint military exercises and establishing military attachés in both countries during their meeting in Tehran on August 1.[21] This increasing cooperation is consistent with the Iranian effort to build strategic partnerships with revisionist states, such as China, Russia, Venezuela, and Belarus. Bagheri also called for increasing defense industry cooperation between Iran and Belarus during this meeting.[22] CTP previously assessed that Khrenin may have discussed establishing Shahed kamikaze drone factories in Belarus to support the Russian invasion of Ukraine.[23] These factories would benefit Russia by providing its forces Iranian drones to use in Ukraine more readily. Iran would benefit by receiving much-needed revenue to stimulate its deteriorating economy.

Iran will send a low-level economic delegation to Brazil between late September and October 2023, possibly as part of an effort to facilitate Iran joining BRICS.[24] Iran-Brazil Joint Chamber of Commerce Chairman Fakhreddin Amerian announced on August 2 that Iranian agricultural, mining, dry fruit, and petrochemical traders, among others, will travel to Brazil. Iranian media has provided inconsistent reports about whether an Iranian trade delegation has previously traveled to Brazil.[25] Iranian officials nevertheless lauded the planned visit as a significant development in Iran-Brazil relations. Tehran may seek to expand economic ties with

Brazil in part to convince Brazilian leaders to approve Iran joining BRICS. Reuters reported on August 2 that Brazil currently opposes adding more member states to BRICS.[26] Iranian officials have frequently expressed a desire to join BRICS and have emphasized that Iran would be a “reliable partner” for BRICS countries.[27]

Iran’s economic and environmental conditions continue to worsen, which will likely intensify anti-regime sentiments among parts of the population.

- **Economy.** The Iranian rial surpassed 500,000 rials to one US dollar on August 1 for the first time since early July.[28] Iranian and Western media have reported on the devastating impacts of these economic conditions on Iranian citizens in recent days. One Iranian citizen recently lamented to the French newspaper *Le Monde* that “our standard of living is plummeting, while the regime’s sons and daughters enjoy every advantage and benefit. The fire is smoldering under the ashes.”[29] Iranian media additionally circulated a report on August 1 of medical residents committing suicide over low salaries and lack of insurance.[30]
- **Environment.** The Raisi administration shut down all government offices, banks, and schools on August 2-3 due to extreme heat.[31] Several Iranian cities have recorded temperatures over 120 degrees Fahrenheit in recent weeks.[32] Health Ministry spokesperson Pedram Pak Ayin stated on August 2 that the closure may continue into the weekend if temperatures do not decrease.[33] The regime is struggling to keep electricity running across Iran due in part to the extreme heat. CTP observed a protest triggered by an electricity outage for the first time in 2023 on July 31.[34]

Iranian leaders are publicly discussing approaches to more effectively confront social unrest in response to anti-regime frustrations.

- **Expanding the Basij.** Iranian security officials have emphasized the need to expand and further entrench the Basij throughout Iranian society. The Basij is a vast internal security organization that includes ideological youth movements and highly trained, quasi-professional paramilitary units, among other elements.[35] AFGS Chief Major General Mohammad Bagheri relayed Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei’s instructions to expand the size of the Basij forces during a Basij commanders conference on August 2. [36] Basij Deputy Commander Brigadier General Haidar Baba Ahmadi similarly stated in January 2023 that the Basij currently has bases in 11,300 neighborhoods across Iran and plans on increasing this presence to 40,000 neighborhoods over the next ten years. [37]
- **Suppressing dissent in universities.** Several IRGC officials warned between July 20 and 27 that universities will be the source of future anti-regime activities, called on university officials to combat anti-regime activities, and expressed the IRGC’s intent to “securitize” universities in the near future.[38] Iranian authorities have also targeted universities in recent weeks, purging anti-regime university professors, limiting the activities of student organizations, and imposing penalties on students engaged in civic activities.[39] Universities became a major site of unrest throughout the Mahsa Amini movement, which students helped lead.[40] Iranian students are, furthermore, planning protests in early September 2023 in commemoration of Mahsa Amini’s killing, as CTP previously reported.[41]
- **Monitoring cyberspace:** The Supreme National Security Council has approved measures as of July 27 for the Intelligence and Security Ministry to monitor cyberspace to establish “psychological security.”[42] Regime officials have repeatedly accused protesters of causing “psychological insecurity.”[43]

Iran Update, August 3, 2023

Iran Update, August 3, 2023

Amin Soltani, Ashka Jhaveri, and Annika Ganzeveld

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Key Takeaways

1. Iran is training militants to use attack drones in eastern Syria, likely part of a campaign to expel US forces.
2. President Ebrahim Raisi invited Emirati President Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan on August 3 to visit Tehran as part of Iran's continued effort to manage a stable and predictable relationship with the Gulf Arab states.
3. Iran and Syria are continuing negotiations over the establishment of a free trade zone. It is unclear whether these negotiations will lead to the establishment of a free trade zone between Iran and Syria in the near future, however.



Iranian Activities in the Levant

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Iran is training militants to use attack drones in eastern Syria, likely part of a campaign to expel US forces. Iranian-backed militias tested one-way attack drones on August 2 at an Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force (IRGC QF) headquarters in Deir ez Zor.[1] Local media reported on August 3 that over 170 militants from Hasakah Province traveled to Mayadin and Albu Kamal for training on attack drones and short-range rockets.[2] The 170 militants will return to Hasakah Province to carry out unspecified missions after the training.[3] Iranian-backed militias have previously used drones to attack and surveil US bases, including attacking the Al Tanf Garrison on January 20 and a base in Hasakah on March 23, which resulted in the death of a US contractor. [4] Iran has increased its military and logistical capabilities in Hasakah Province since early 2022.[5] Iran maintains some military facilities in Hasakah, which are closer to several US bases in SDF-controlled territory.[6]

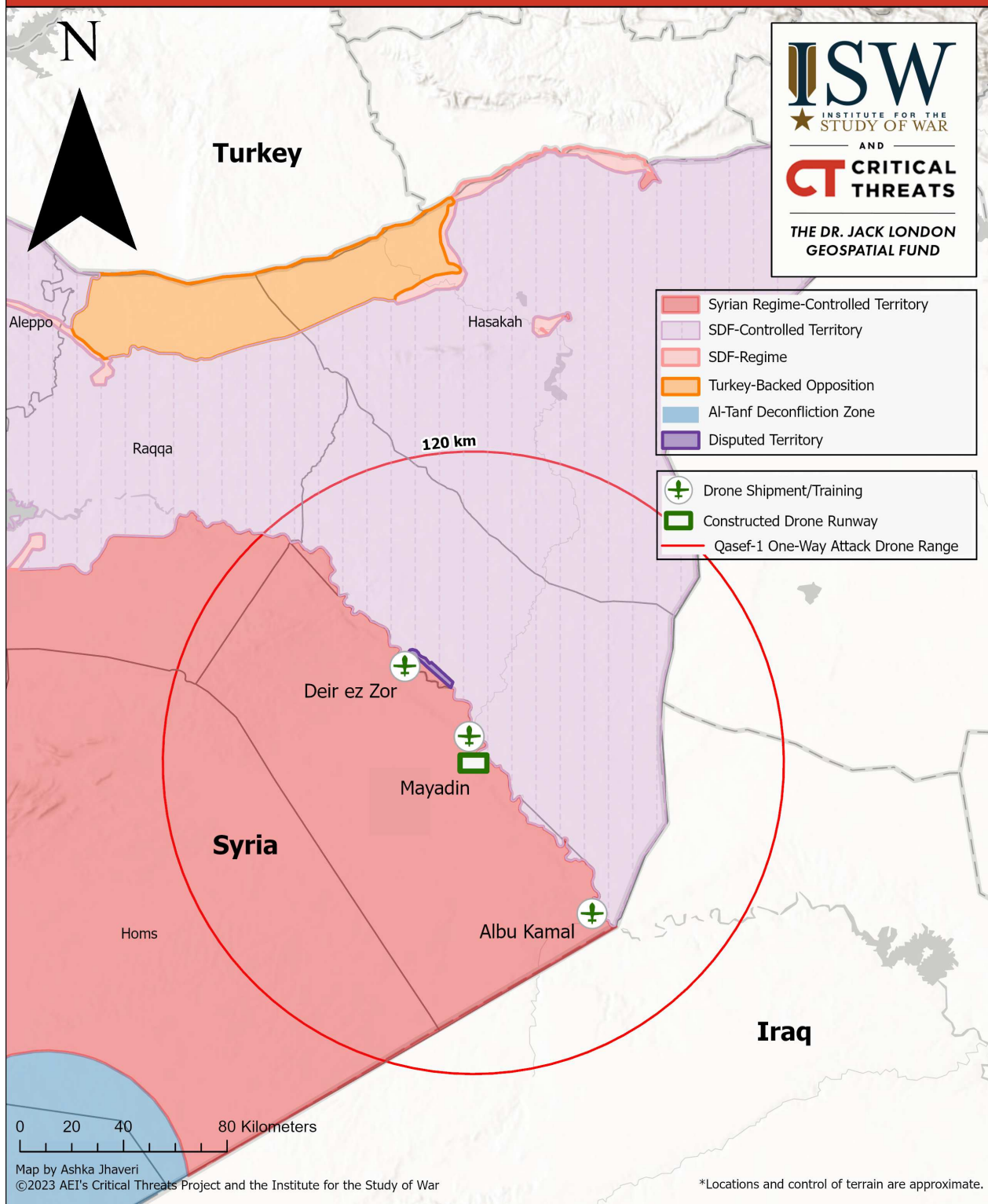
CTP has observed the following attack drones in Deir ez Zor Province in 2023, which Iran could use to attack US forces:

	Ababil-3 ^{vii}	Qasef-1 ^{viii}
Role	Multirole	Combat
Launch Type	Runway takeoff	Jet assisted takeoff
Range	250 kilometers	120 kilometers
Munitions	Almas anti-tank guided missile Ghaem glide bomb	30-kilogram warhead

CTP has observed Iran preparing to resume its campaign to expel US forces from the Middle East since early June. Iran has recruited, armed, and trained militias with resources and capabilities necessary to conduct a prolonged offensive campaign on US forces in Syria. Iranian-backed militias have deployed to the Syrian desert surrounding the Al Tanf Deconfliction Zone which surrounds the US Al Tanf Garrison, deployed to contact lines with the SDF in Deir ez Zor Province, as well as moved military materiel to both areas. Iran recruited local Syrians in SDF-

controlled territory to support a grassroots resistance to expel the United States from Syria, including recruiting for sleeper cells identify US positions, plant explosive devices, and spread clan strife in the region.[9] Local militia leaders, such as Nawaf al Bashir, who leads the Baqir Brigade, Hashem Masoud al-Sattam leader of the Usud al Akidat militia, and Abdul Qadir Hamo commander of the National Defense Forces in Hasakah Province, have worked with the IRGC QF to recruit locals for these purposes.[10]

Iranian Drone Activity in Eastern Syria | August 1-3, 2023



Iranian Domestic and Political Affairs

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President Ebrahim Raisi invited Emirati President Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan on August 3 to visit Tehran as part of Iran's continued effort to manage a stable and predictable relationship with the Gulf Arab states.[11] Senior Iranian officials embarked on a course of diplomatic engagements with the Gulf Arab states, including the UAE, to deescalate tensions and pursue economic cooperation following Iran normalizing relations with Saudi Arabia on March 10, as CTP previously reported.[12] Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Secretary Ali Shamkhani traveled to the UAE on March 16 and met with Emirati President Mohammad bin Zayed al Nahyan and National Security Adviser Tahnoun bin Zayed al Nahyan to discuss bilateral ties and regional security.[13] He is the most senior Iranian official to visit the country since President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2007.[14] Foreign Affairs Ministry Political Deputy Ali Bagheri Kani announced the appointment of Reza Ameri as Iran's ambassador to the UAE on April 4. [15] Ameri is the first Iranian ambassador to the UAE in eight years.

Iran very likely seeks to advance the following objectives specifically vis-a-vis the UAE during bin Zayed's visit:

- **Sanctions evasion.** Iran has used businesses in Emirati commercial centers to circumvent US sanctions over the past decade.[16] Central Bank Governor Mohammad Reza Farzin and Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian engaged Emirati officials between March 16 and 21 to discuss the monetary, banking, foreign exchange, and private business interactions.[17] These economic and financial interactions facilitate Iranian efforts to bypass US sanctions.
- **Broader economic cooperation and investment.** The Raisi administration is advancing its "neighborhood policy," which is an economic policy that aims to buoy the Iranian economy and mitigate the effects of sanctions by building relations with regional and extra-regional states.[18] Abdollahian visited several GCC states, including the UAE, between June 19 and 22 as part of this policy and discussed increasing economic cooperation through trade, energy, transportation, banking,

communications technology, and private business.[19] Iran is furthermore seeking Emirati investment in railway construction along the International North-South Transportation Corridor.

[20] Iran has attached importance to developing the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), a transit route connecting Russia and Central Asia to the Persian Gulf via Iran, to bolster Iran's economy in recent years.[21] Supreme Council of Free Trade-Industrial and Special Economic Zones Secretary Hojjatollah Abdolmaleki furthermore reported on August 3 that the UAE plans on investing 100 billion dollars in the Iranian economy.[22]

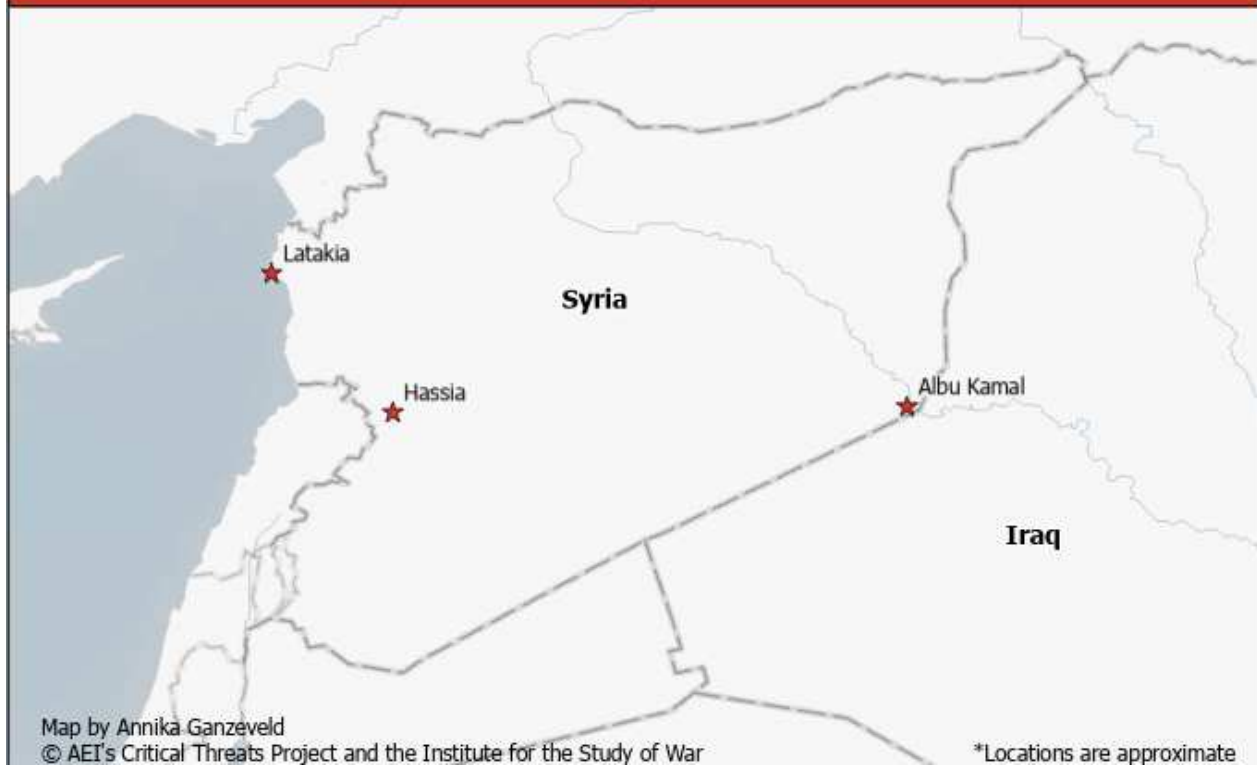
- **Capitalize on perceived tensions to weaken the US-led maritime security partnership in the Persian Gulf.** The Emirati Foreign Affairs Ministry stated on May 31 that the UAE suspended participation in the US-led Combined Maritime Force, a multinational naval partnership dedicated to ensuring freedom of navigation.[23] Artesh Navy Commander Rear Admiral Shahram Erani stated on June 2 that the regional states will be able to establish security for themselves without the presence of any "unjustified force," referring to the United States.[24] Iranian media also reported on June 2 that China is overseeing negotiations between Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, Iraq, India, and Pakistan to form a joint maritime security force in the Persian Gulf.[25]
- **Discuss recent tensions over disputed Islands.** Iran seized the islands of Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs in 1971 shortly after the British withdrawal from the area. The UAE has disputed Iran's claim to the Islands. Tensions over the issue resumed once China and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) published a joint statement calling for negotiations between Iran and the UAE over the three Iranian-controlled islands in December 2022.[26] Russia and the GCC countries similarly issued a joint statement calling for negotiations over the islands on July 10.[27] Iranian officials have responded by condemning both statements and summoning the Chinese and Russian

ambassadors to the Foreign Affairs Ministry.[28] The IRGC Navy also held one of its annual exercises on Abu Musa on August 2 to reaffirm control over the disputed islands, as CTP previously assessed.[29] IRGC Commander Major General Hossein Salami and IRGC Navy Commander Rear Admiral Ali Reza Tangsiri stated on the sidelines of the exercise that Iran will strongly defend its territorial integrity.[30]

Iran and Syria are continuing negotiations over the establishment of a free trade zone. It is unclear whether these negotiations will lead to the establishment of a free trade zone between Iran and Syria in the near future, however. Iranian Free and Special Economic Zones

Supreme Council Secretary Hojatollah Abdol Maleki discussed establishing a free trade zone between Iran and Syria during a meeting with Syrian Economy and Foreign Trade Minister Mohammad Samer al Khalil and Syrian Ambassador to Iran Shafiq Dayoub in Tehran on August 2.[31] Khalil stated that Iran and Syria seek to establish a free trade zone in Latakia, Al Bukamal, and Hassia, Syria. Latakia is a major port in western Syria, Al Bukamal is near the Iraq-Syria border, and Hassia is located on the M5 highway between Homs and Damascus, Syria.[32] Khalil added that Iranian and Syria officials have held “several” meetings about the establishment of this economic zone. Abdol Maleki announced on May 6 following President Ebrahim Raisi’s May 3-5 trip to Syria that plans to establish a free trade zone between Iran, Iraq, and Syria had entered a “technical and implementation stage.”[33] The Syrian and Iranian officials did not mention Iraq’s role in establishing a free trade zone during their August 2 meeting. A free trade zone through Syria, Iraq, and Iran would allow Iran to move materiel across borders without oversight that would normally enforce sanctions on trade with Syria and Iran.[34]

Proposed Free Trade Zone Locations in Syria



Iran Update, August 4, 2023

Iran Update, August 4, 2023

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

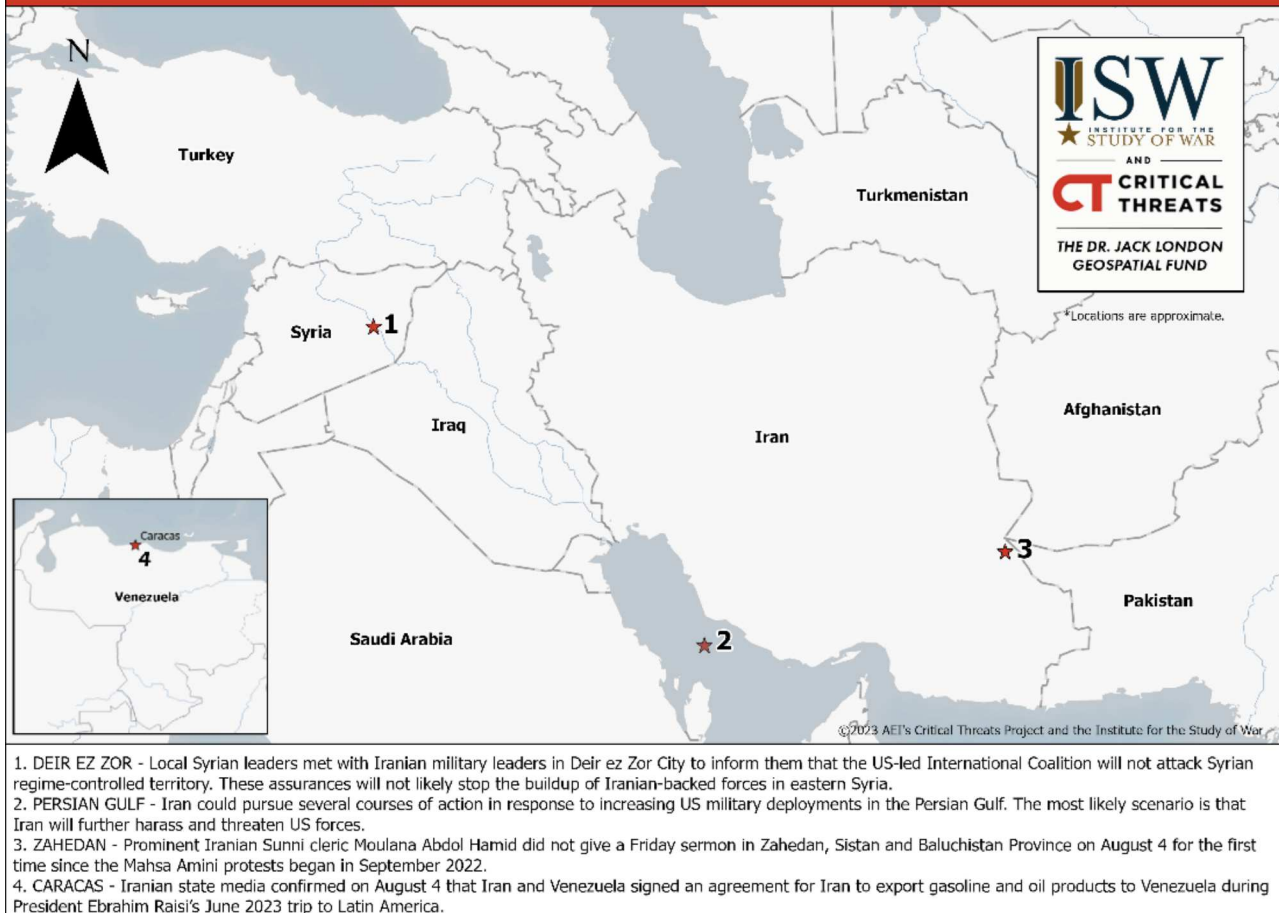
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Key Takeaways

1. Local Syrian leaders met with Iranian military leaders in Deir ez Zor City to inform them that the US-led International Coalition will not attack Syrian regime-controlled territory. These assurances will not likely stop the buildup of Iranian-backed forces in eastern Syria.
2. Iran could pursue several courses of action in response to increasing US military deployments in the Persian Gulf. The most likely scenario is that Iran will further harass and threaten US forces.
3. Prominent Iranian Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid did not give a Friday sermon in Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchistan Province on August 4 for the first time since the Mahsa Amini protests began in September 2022.
4. Iranian state media confirmed on August 4 that Iran and Venezuela signed an agreement for Iran to export gasoline and oil products to Venezuela during President Ebrahim Raisi's June 2023 trip to Latin America.

Iran Update | August 4, 2023



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Local Syrian leaders met with Iranian military leaders in Deir ez Zor City to inform them that the US-led International Coalition will not attack Syrian regime-controlled territory.

[1] These assurances will not likely stop the buildup of Iranian-backed forces in eastern Syria. A rumor spread in eastern Syria in late June 2023 that the US-led International Coalition planned such attacks. Pro-regime forces, including Iranian- and Russian-backed militants, deployed to the line of contact with the SDF in eastern Syria throughout July 2023, ostensibly in response, despite there being no evidence of an imminent attack.[2] Iran and Russia amplified these rumors to frame the US as an imminent threat to local Syrians. CTP previously assessed that Iran, Russia, and Assad have emphasized these rumors and used the deployments to pressure the United States to leave Syria.[3] Iran and Russia have coordinated since November 2022 to stoke local frustration toward US forces and create a maximally hostile operating environment for US personnel. SDF officials met with Russian and Syrian officers several times in July 2023 to deescalate and assure them that they would not attack Syrian regime-controlled territory. More recently, local anti-Syrian regime media reported on August 3 that local Syrian leaders met with Iranian military officials in Deir ez Zor City to similarly assure them that there are no plans to attack.[4]

A continued buildup of Iranian-backed forces in eastern Syria would indicate that the talks with local Syrian leaders failed to deescalate the situation. A continued buildup would also be consistent with CTP's assessment that the deployments are meant to pressure US forces rather than to defend against a rumored US- and SDF-led attack into Assad-held territory.

Iranian and Axis of Resistance media reported that Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani visited Iranian-backed military positions in Syria on August 3 to inspect combat readiness.[5] An unidentified local source indicated Ghaani met with local Iranian-backed militia leaders in Deir ez Zor Province.[6] Axis media quoted Ghaani as stating, “Iran and Syria’s enemies know very well the initiative in the region is in the hands of the Axis of Resistance.”[7] As discussed above, local anti-Syrian regime media reported on August 3 that local Syrian leaders met with Iranian military officials in Deir ez Zor City to discuss military tensions and a possible SDF offensive.[8] Ghaani may have participated in these meetings given the timing of these events.

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 could pursue several courses of action in response to increasing US military deployments in the Persian Gulf. Western media reported on August 3 that the United States is considering placing armed sailors and Marines on commercial vessels transiting the Strait of Hormuz to deter Iran from attacking and/or seizing these vessels.[9] These reports come after the United States had already sent a naval destroyer, fighter jets, and Marine units to the area to deter Iranian aggression.[10] IRGC Navy Commander Rear Admiral Ali Reza Tangsiri threatened on July 20 that Iran will hold the United States and US companies responsible for confiscating and unloading Iranian oil.[11] Tangsiri was responding to the US seizure of the *Suez Rajan* tanker, which illegally carried Iranian oil, in April 2023. The *Wall Street Journal* reported on July 18 that US companies fear Iranian retaliation and are hesitant to unload Iranian oil from the *Suez Rajan* tanker.[12] Possible trajectories, which are not mutually exclusive, include the following:

- Iran could harass and threaten US forces. Such activities could include conducting threatening displays of Iranian naval capabilities, firing in the direction of US forces, or using naval and aerial platforms to conduct unsafe, unprofessional maneuvers around US forces. These scenarios are plausible because Iran has previously resorted to such tactics to harass and threaten US service members operating in the Persian Gulf.[13] A potential indicator for this course of action would be Iranian officials and state media claiming that US naval vessels are coming too close to Iran’s territorial waters. Iranian officials and media often falsely frame Iranian harassment of US ships as warning the US that its vessels are approaching Iranian internal waters. CTP is unlikely to observe other indicators for this scenario in the open-source environment, however, such as Iranian leaders ordering this approach or adjusting their rules of engagement to allow for such tactics. This scenario is Iran’s most likely course of action as it carries the lowest risk of direct military confrontation while still pressuring the United States.
- A more dangerous course of action is Iran capturing a US vessel—manned or unmanned—and possibly holding any crewmembers hostage. Iranian naval forces captured a US Navy vessel and its crew in January 2016. Iran also seized unmanned US vessels in August and September 2022.[14] Iranian naval forces similarly captured British naval vessels and their crews in 2004.[15] A potential indicator for this scenario would be regime officials threatening to target US naval assets. CTP is unlikely to observe other indicators for this course of action, however, such as Iranian leaders ordering Iranian naval forces to take US sailors hostage.
- Iran could choose not to take any action. An indicator for this approach would be Iranian state media and officials offering benign comments or simply not commenting on the increasing US naval presence in the coming days and weeks.

Prominent Iranian Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid did not give a Friday sermon in Zahedan, Sistan and Baluchistan Province on August 4 for the first time since the Mahsa Amini protests began in September 2022.[16] Abdol Hamid’s social media accounts reported that he was present at Friday prayers but did not speak due to a “slight illness.”[17] The accounts posted a picture of Abdol Hamid at Friday prayers wearing a mask. Abdol Hamid has openly criticized the regime since security forces violently suppressed protesters in Zahedan on September

30, 2022, in an event that became known as “Bloody Friday.”[18] Abdol Hamid has frequently criticized the regime’s religious hypocrisy, discrimination of religious and ethnic minorities, and violence toward citizens in his sermons.[19] His fiery sermons sparked anti-regime protests in Zahedan every Friday since September 30, 2022.[20]

Iranian state media confirmed on August 4 that Iran and Venezuela signed an agreement for Iran to export gasoline and oil products to Venezuela during President Ebrahim Raisi’s June 2023 trip to Latin America.[21] The reports added that Iran and Venezuela signed contracts for the construction of joint refineries. CTP previously reported that the Raisi administration seeks to expand Iran’s economic influence in Latin America, especially Venezuela, which is an important energy partner for Tehran.[22] Iran has previously exported condensates and heavy crude oil to Venezuela, repaired Venezuelan refineries, and delivered oil tankers to Venezuela.[23] Greater energy cooperation with Venezuela would enable Iran to increase its capital inflows but would not solve the problems that underlie Iran’s economic instability. Fundamental economic reforms—such as reducing the dominance of para-statal organizations in Iran’s economy, combatting corruption and nepotism, and diversifying the Iranian economy—would be necessary to meaningfully improve Iran’s economy.[24]

Iran Update, August 8, 2023

Iran Update, August 8, 2023

Annika Ganzeveld, Ashka Jhaveri, and Andie Parry

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 Lebanese Hezbollah continued to circulate false claims that the US-led International Coalition is preparing to attack Syrian regime-controlled territory in eastern Syria. Their messaging is part of a coordinated Iranian, Russian, and Syrian regime coercion campaign to expel US forces from Syria.
2. Iran secured a majority stake in a major Syrian telecommunications company. Iran's assistance could enable the Syrian regime to restrict the Syrian information space through the new telecommunications company.
3. Iran is trying to convince BRICS members to accept its request to join this organization ahead of the 15th annual BRICS Summit in Johannesburg, South Africa on August 22-24. Becoming a BRICS member could help Iran mitigate the impact of Western sanctions.
4. The Iranian regime has detained a fifth US national. Iran possibly detained the US national to gain leverage against the United States in its efforts to release frozen Iranian assets in Iraq and South Korea.

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- 2). DAMASCUS - Iran secured a majority stake in a Syrian telecommunications company. Iran's assistance could enable the Syrian regime to restrict the Syrian information space through the new telecommunications company.
- 3). TEHRAN - Iran is trying to convince BRICS members to accept its request to join this organization ahead of the 15th annual BRICS Summit in Johannesburg, South Africa on August 22-24. Becoming a BRICS member could help Iran mitigate the impact of Western sanctions.
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Iranian Activities in the Levant

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

Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah continued to circulate false claims that the US-led International Coalition is preparing to attack Syrian regime-controlled territory in eastern Syria. Their messaging is part of a coordinated Iranian, Russian, and Syrian regime coercion campaign to expel US forces from Syria. Several senior Iranian and Syrian officials, including Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force Commander Esmail Ghaani, have traveled to eastern Syria since July 31 to assess military positioning.[1][2]

- Iranian-state media reported on August 7 that the United States is transferring military equipment from Iraq to Syria to conduct a military operation “in the coming days.”[3] Iran has continued to message that it will defend itself against an International Coalition attack despite receiving multiple assurances that this will not happen demonstrating a failure to deescalate.
- A Lebanese Hezbollah commander “gave the green light” to forces in Deir ez Zor Province on August 7 to attack the US-led International Coalition if Iranian-backed militias come under attack, according to the UK-based *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights*. [4]

Iranian and Syrian regime-affiliated sources have circulated false claims since late June that the United States and allied forces in Syria intend to launch an offensive to retake regime-held towns. [5] The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) has stated publicly and to Russian and Syrian regime officials that its operations in eastern Syria are non-emergency operations to eliminate ISIS cells.

[6] There are no indications that the United States or SDF have been planning incursions into regime-held territory.

ISW previously warned that Iran, Russia, and the Syrian regime are coordinating a coercive campaign to expel the United States from Syria.[7] This campaign poses a serious risk to US forces in Syria and US interests in the Middle East.[8] The IRGC Quds Force directed militia deployments to Deir ez Zor Province, primarily along lines of control with the SDF in Deir ez Zor City, beginning in early July.[9] The IRGC Quds Force also oversaw Iranian-backed militia deployments to areas in the central Syrian desert near the 55-kilometer exclusion zone around the Al Tanf Garrison.[10] Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and Syrian Republican Guards units, including the Russian-backed SAA 5th Corps, deployed to Deir ez Zor Province from July 7-20 near Iranian-backed forces and along the line of control with the SDF.[11] The Syrian Defense Minister and IRGC Quds Force officials coordinated the deployments in Deir ez Zor City on July 13. [12] Unspecified Russian forces transferred 17 trucks of weapons to Iranian-backed militias in Deir Zor City between June 19-20.[13]

The coordinated Iranian, Russian, and Syrian regime coercion campaign sets the groundwork for Iran to direct a proxy attack against US forces in Syria. CTP is presenting two scenarios in which Iran directs attacks, possibly as part of a compellence campaign to expel US forces from Syria. These scenarios are not mutually exclusive.

- **Iran directs its militants to conduct a drone attack on US forces in Syria.** This hypothesis is plausible because Iran has distributed and trained militants on attack drones in eastern Syria.[14] Iran has trained forces from different regions in Syria on using both surveillance and combat drones, allowing it direct attacks on multiple US positions.[15] Iran has already demonstrated its willingness to attack and kill US forces using drones.[16] Indicators that would support this scenario include: 1) Iranian commanders ordering an attack on the US-led International Coalition; 2) Iranian-backed militants deploying drones to forces in the field; 3) Iranian-backed forces conduct small-scale attacks into SDF-controlled territory to assess US reactions.
- **Iran directs or authorizes its militias to use explosively formed penetrators (EFPs) against US forces in Syria.** This scenario is plausible because Iran has distributed EFPs to its forces in Syria.[17] Iran has also recruited local Syrians for sleeper cells to identify US positions, plant explosive devices, and spread clan strife in the region. [18] Local tribal leaders have worked with the IRGC QF to recruit Syrians for these purposes.[19] Cultivating an anti-US grassroots resistance movement that conducts attacks on US forces is one component of Iran's campaign to expel the United States from Syria.[20] Indicators that would support this scenario include: 1) Iranian commanders ordering covert attacks on US forces; 2) Local Syrians surveilling US positions; 3) Iranian-backed militias instigating or amplifying a crisis among clans in SDF-controlled territory.

Iran secured a majority stake in a Syrian telecommunications company. The Iran-Syria Joint Economic Committee head Mehrdad Bazarpash acknowledged on July 31 that the Iranian and Syrian Ministries of Communications were collaborating to implement the new Syrian Telecom company *Wafa*. [21] The Syrian Ministry of Communications and Technology issued *Wafa* a contract to be Syria's third telecommunications provider in February 2022.[22] An investigation by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project claimed Azim Monzavi, a US-sanctioned member of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), is a majority stakeholder in *Wafa*. [23] Anti-Syrian regime outlet *Voice of the Capital* uncovered that Iranian companies supply equipment to the network, such as SIM cards and telecommunication towers.[24] *Wafa's* CEO stated the network will be operational in early 2024.[25]

Iran will likely reap economic benefits from owning and operating the telecommunication company in Syria. Iran's involvement in *Wafa* is part of a large-scale campaign to profit off Syrian reconstruction and revitalize its sanctioned economy. This joint telecom company is one of several joint economic projects Iran and Syria have implemented since Iranian President Raisi's May 2023

visit to Syria.[26] Raisi and Syrian President Bashar al Assad signed 15 memoranda of understanding on May 3 that covered oil, energy, transportation, reconstruction, and communications technology.[27] Wafa will provide Iranian manufacturing companies a larger market to sell equipment to, and the Iranian state will reap profits through the IRGC's majority stake in the company.

Iran's assistance could enable the Syrian regime to restrict the Syrian information space through the new telecommunications company. The Iranian regime frequently disrupts the internet and blocks access to foreign social media platforms in Iran to prevent anti-regime protests and reduce the spread of existing protests.[28] Iran helped develop Yemen's telecommunication sector to enable the Houthis to surveil civilians and suppress domestic dissent beginning in 2018, as CTP previously reported.[29]

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 trying to convince BRICS members to accept its request to join this organization ahead of the 15th annual BRICS Summit in Johannesburg, South Africa on August 22-24. Iran organized an 'Iran and BRICS: Prospects for Partnership and Cooperation' conference in Tehran on August 8.[30] Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian framed Iran as an important intermediary between BRICS members, stating that Iran can connect China to Brazil and South Africa.[31] Abdollahian added that Iran is a "reliable and effective" partner due to its "geostrategic position." President Ebrahim Raisi similarly emphasized Iran's efforts to connect Central Asian Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) members to open waters following Iran's accession into the SCO on July 4.[32] Iranian media recently circulated Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov's August 1 statement that BRICS members will discuss the expansion of this organization at the upcoming summit.[33]

Becoming a BRICS member could help Iran mitigate the impact of Western sanctions. Iranian media and officials have frequently emphasized the role BRICS can play in reducing the dominance of the US dollar in the global economy. Iranian state media reported on July 28 that Brazil and India—two BRICS members—are pursuing de-dollarization, for example.[34] State media also reported on August 2 that BRICS members may discuss "the issue of launching a new BRICS currency" at the August 22-24 summit.[35] Abdollahian separately emphasized that BRICS seeks to reduce the cost of international trade, partly by using national currencies, during the 'Iran and BRICS: Prospects for Partnership and Cooperation' conference on August 8.[36] Iran seeks to conduct economic exchanges in local currencies to preserve its dwindling foreign currency reserves.[37]

Iran's emphasis on joining BRICS is also part of its broader efforts to establish a parallel world order that challenges Western "dominance" and "unilateralism." [38] Iran held a panel called "BRICS and its Role in an Emerging Multipolar World" at its August 8 conference, underscoring that the Raisi administration regards multilateral organizations such as BRICS as integral to balancing against "American unilateralism." [39] Abdollahian additionally previously stated that Iran's main goal for joining the SCO and BRICS is to "develop Iran's foreign trade and move toward multilateralism." [40]

The Iranian regime has detained a fifth US national. [41] Iranian media announced on August 8 that the regime detained an Iranian-American female "in recent weeks." [42] This announcement follows the regime's detainment of another US national on July 21. [43] The announcement also follows a flurry of Raisi administration diplomatic engagement with Oman, which has facilitated prisoner swap negotiations between Iran and the US in recent months. [44] President Ebrahim Raisi held a phone call with Omani Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on August 1, after which Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Ali Bagheri Kani traveled to Muscat, Oman on August 3. [45] Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian separately held a phone call with his Omani counterpart Sayyid Badr Al Busaidi on August 8. [46] Abdollahian separately stated on August 8 that Iran has been

discussing prisoner swaps with the United States via Oman and Qatar for months and that Iran has announced its readiness to conduct prisoner exchanges “to intermediary parties.”[47]

Iran possibly detained the US national to gain leverage against the United States in its efforts to release frozen Iranian assets in Iraq and South Korea. Iranian and Western media have reported that one of Iran’s demands for releasing US prisoners is the release of Iranian funds frozen in foreign banks.[48] The US State Department announced on August 2 that Iraq will repay “hundreds of millions of dollars” of its electricity debt to Iran via Oman.[49] Iranian Foreign Affairs Ministry spokesperson Nasser Kanani reiterated on August 7 that part of Iran’s “financial demands” from Iraq have been transferred to a “third country.”[50] Iran has seemingly made less progress in releasing its frozen assets from South Korea. Parliamentary National Security and Foreign Policy Committee member Fada Hossein Maleki warned South Korea on August 8 that if it does not release Iran’s 7 billion dollars' worth of frozen assets, Iran “has many options that will be detrimental to South Korea.”[51]

Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) officials have reasserted Iran’s tit-for-tat policy with respect to seizing commercial tankers in the Persian Gulf in recent days. IRGC Commander Major General Hossein Salami stated on August 5 that Iran’s enemies are unable to confront and control the IRGC’s power.[52] Salami made this statement during an event to equip the IRGC Navy with new drones and 1,000-kilometer range missiles. IRGC spokesperson Brigadier General Ramazan Sharif separately warned on August 7 that “US mischief,” including the seizure of Iranian vessels, will be met with a “reciprocal response.”[53] The IRGC statements come amid rising tensions between the United States and Iran in the Persian Gulf and the US Navy’s deployment of more than 3,000 sailors and Marines to the Red Sea on August 6.[54] Iranian state media described the deployment as “Washington’s newest provocative action.”[55]

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Iran Update, August 10, 2023

Iran Update, August 10, 2023

Annika Ganzeveld and Andie Parry

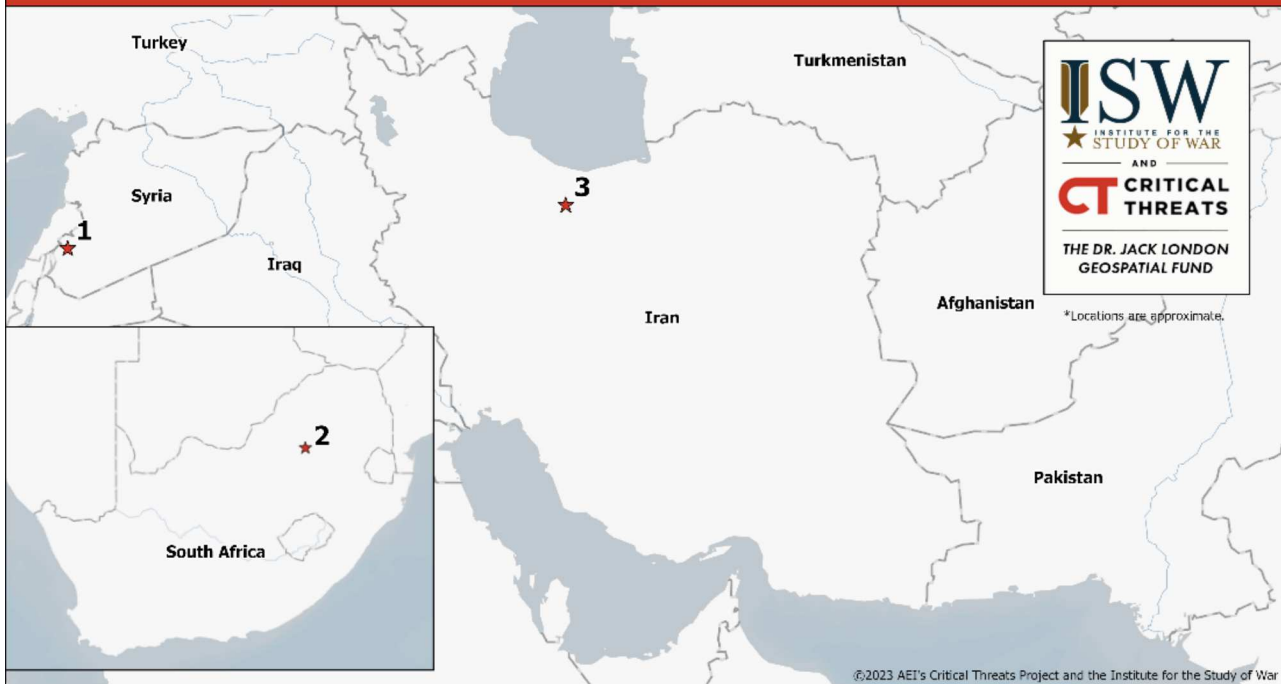
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Key Takeaways

1. Syrian President Bashar al Assad downplayed the importance of relations with the Arab states while stressing relations with Iran and Russia during an interview with the UAE-based *Sky News Arabic* on August 9.
2. Iran's Foreign Affairs Ministry is continuing its diplomatic campaign to convince BRICS countries to admit Iran as a BRICS member ahead of the organization's 15th annual summit in Johannesburg, South Africa on August 22-24.
3. Iran and the United States reached an agreement on August 10 for the release of five US nationals detained in Iran. The United States will release six billion dollars of frozen Iranian assets and release several Iranian prisoners as part of the agreement. The release of six billion dollars would be a significant boost for Iran's struggling economy.

Iran Update | August 10, 2023



1. DAMASCUS - Syrian President Bashar al Assad downplayed the importance of relations with the Arab states while stressing relations with Iran and Russia during an interview with the UAE-based Sky News Arabic on August 9.
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Iranian Activities in the Levant

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

Syrian President Bashar al Assad downplayed the importance of relations with the Arab states while stressing relations with Iran and Russia during an interview with the UAE-based Sky News Arabic on August 9.[1] Assad discussed Syria's readmission to the Arab League in May 2023 but downplayed the significance of the event. He stated that these ties are only formal relations, indicated the Arab states lack real problem-solving capacity, and downplayed the benefits that normalizing relations with the Arab League could have for Syria's economy. Assad also dismissed concerns that the Arab League has raised and seeks for the Syrian regime to address. These concerns include the return of refugees to Syria, the Captagon trade, and the presence of foreign militias in Syria. This contrasts with the emphasis Assad gave to the importance of the Syrian regime's ties to Iran and Russia. He reaffirmed his strong relationship with Iran and Russia, stating "the relationship with Russia and Iran proved Syria knows how to choose its friends correctly."

Assad gave similar interviews to Russian news outlets in 2020 and 2022.[2] Assad's comments about the Syrian regime's close ties to Iran and Russia on August 9 are consistent across the previous interviews. Assad's demands that Turkey fully withdraw from Syrian territory and stop supporting terrorist groups are consistent with the previous interview as well.

Assad stressing relations between the Syrian regime, Iran, and Russia are consistent with reports that Iran and Russia have been strengthening the capacity of the Syrian regime this year. Both have expanded institutional, political, military, and economic ties with the Assad regime while

facilitating Syrian reconstruction projects.[3] Iran announced in February 2023 its intent to provide air defense systems to Syria to rebuild the Assad regime's defensive capabilities, for instance.[4]

Iranian Domestic and Political Affairs

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

Iran's Foreign Affairs Ministry is continuing its diplomatic campaign to convince BRICS countries to admit Iran as a BRICS member ahead of the organization's 15th annual summit in Johannesburg, South Africa on August 22-24. Raisi administration officials have frequently expressed Iran's interest in joining BRICS and organized a conference on August 8 to promote the benefits that Iran's membership would bring other BRICS members.[5] Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian traveled to Pretoria, South Africa on August 9 to attend an Iran-South Africa Joint Economic Cooperation Commission meeting.[6] He also attempted to assuage concerns about Iran's admission to BRICS by misrepresenting Iranian policies during a press conference on August 10.[7] Abdollahian falsely claimed that Iran has not supported Russia's invasion of Ukraine.[8] Iran has supplied Russia with more than 400 drones since August 2022 and is helping Russia construct a drone factory that will significantly increase Russia's drone stockpile.[9] Abdollahian likely made this statement to assuage the South African government's concern that Iran seeks to make BRICS an "anti-Western bloc." [10] South African International Relations and Cooperation Minister Naledi Pandor emphasized on August 10 that it is "very wrong" to assume that South Africa is "pro-Russian" or "anti-Western." CTP previously reported that Iran seeks to join BRICS as part of its efforts to create a parallel world order with other revisionist states to confront Western "dominance." [11]

Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Ali Bagheri Kani separately pursued Iran's BRICS ambitions in Brazil on August 10.[12] Kani emphasized that BRICS contributes to a "stable and development-oriented" order during a meeting with Brazilian Foreign Affairs Ministry Africa and Middle East Secretary Carlos Sergio Sobral Duarte in Brasilia, Brazil.[13] Kani added that cooperation between Brazil and Iran "strengthens multilateralism." Reuters reported on August 2 that Brazil currently opposes adding more member states to BRICS.[14]

Iranian officials will advance the diplomatic campaign further in the days ahead. Abdollahian stated that Raisi will travel to South Africa "in the coming days" and that Raisi will clearly explain Iran's positions "regarding BRICS." [15] Raisi last traveled to Africa in July 2023 as part of his administration's economic diplomacy efforts and "good neighborhood policy," which is an economic policy centered on building relations with regional and extra-regional states to undermine Western sanctions.[16] Joining BRICS would be consistent with this policy and could help Iran mitigate the impact of Western sanctions, as CTP previously assessed.[17]

Iran and the United States reached an agreement on August 10 for the release of five US nationals detained in Iran.[18] The United States will release \$6 billion worth of frozen Iranian assets and release several Iranian prisoners as part of the agreement. Iran has transferred five US nationals—including Siamak Namazi, Emad Shargi, and Morad Tahbaz—from Evin Prison to a hotel in Tehran.[19] Western media reported on August 10 that the detainees will likely be transported to Qatar, which, along with Oman and Switzerland, mediated the agreement between Iran and the United States.[20] Washington will transfer \$6 billion worth of Iran's frozen assets in South Korea to an account in Qatar's central bank. Iran will only be able to use this money for "humanitarian purposes." It is unclear how the US will regulate the Iranian regime's use of this money, however.[21]

The release of \$6 billion would be a significant boost for Iran's struggling economy. Iran is currently facing critical economic conditions, with the value of the Iranian rial hovering just below 500,000 to the US dollar on August 10.[22] The rial was comparatively valued at around 298,200 rials to the dollar before the eruption of the anti-regime Mahsa Amini protest movement in September 2022.[23] The Iran Statistical Center reported in July 2023 that Iran's inflation rate is approximately 47.5 percent.[24]

The release of \$6 billion would also help Iran implement its 2023 budget. Iran's 2023 budget counted on selling 1.3 million barrels per day at \$85 per barrel.[25] The *Wall Street Journal* reported on July 6 that Iran exported approximately 1.6 million barrels a day in May and June 2023 albeit at a significant discount.[26] Iran has been offering importers of its oil at a \$30 per barrel discount to compete with Gulf Arab states. This amounts to sales roughly 35 percent below market price. An unspecified Western official recently told *CBS News* that China has been purchasing Iranian oil with a \$20 per barrel discount.[27] This is approximately 23 percent below market price. CTP assessed on August 8 that the Iranian regime detained a fifth US national possibly to gain leverage against the United States in its efforts to release frozen Iranian assets in Iraq and South Korea.[28]

Iran Update, August 11, 2023

Iran Update, August 11, 2023

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

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Key Takeaways

1. Armed militant groups, including ISIS, have claimed attacks against pro-Syrian regime forces in eastern Syria on August 10, which may place pressure on Iranian campaigns and lines of effort there.
2. Syrian President Bashar al Assad indicated on August 9 that he will not seriously address the Arab states' concerns in Syria, despite their revived bilateral ties. Assad's rhetoric suggests that he pursued normalization with the Arab states to boost his international legitimacy but does not assign much urgency to further improving ties with them.
3. Iranian officials insisted that they can spend freely the \$6 billion received as part of the recent prisoner swap agreement with the United States, rebuffing Western reports that Iran can only use the funds for humanitarian purposes. Iranian state media focused predominantly on celebrating the agreement with the United States and framing it as a victory for Iran on August 11.

Iran Update | August 11, 2023



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Iranian Activities in the Levant

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

Armed militant groups, including ISIS, have claimed attacks against pro-Syrian regime forces in eastern Syria on August 10, which may place pressure on Iranian campaigns and lines of effort there. ISIS attacked Syrian Arab Army (SAA) 17th Division forces in the Mayadin desert on August 10 which resulted in over 40 casualties.[1] This attack is the largest on Syrian regime forces in the central Syrian desert since December 2020.[2] The 17th Division has previously collaborated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Quds Force on security measures in eastern Syria.[3] Iranian-backed militias deployed to the desert following the attack.[4] Iranian-backed militias have several military facilities in the desert, including the T-2 Pumping Station, which is close to the location of the ISIS attack.[5] CTP has assessed that previous deployments to the desert may be to set conditions of an attack on US forces at the Al Tanf Garrison.[6] Growing pressure from anti-Iran militants, such as ISIS, may impose pressure on this effort. CTP has also assessed that the Syrian regime's lack of focus on killing and detaining mid-level ISIS leaders will enable the group to execute its campaign plan in Syria, which aims to set conditions for an ISIS resurgence after a US withdrawal.[7]

A militia group called the Burkan al Furat Brigade has claimed multiple attacks on Iranian-backed militias in eastern Syria, including killing an Iranian-backed Iraqi commander outside of Deir ez Zor City on August 10.[8] The group has vowed to continue operations until Iran leaves Syria.[9] It is unclear if the group is responsible for all of the attacks it has claimed, however. The group has claimed attacks in areas where ISIS operates, and CTP cannot corroborate the militia's claims. The recent confirmed attack on an Iraqi officer is consistent with CTP's previous assessment that the

buildup of Iranian-backed forces in eastern Syria since June 2023 may stoke local anti-Iran and anti-Shia discontent.[10] The buildup in forces is part of a coordinated Iranian, Russian, and Syrian regime coercion campaign to expel US forces from Syria.

Syrian President Bashar al Assad indicated on August 9 that he will not seriously address the Arab states' concerns in Syria, despite their revived bilateral ties. Assad downplayed the importance of relations with the Arab states while stressing relations with Iran and Russia during an interview with *Sky News*, which CTP previously reported.[11] Assad also dismissed the concerns of the Arab states, which include disrupting the Captagon trade, returning Syrian refugees, and minimizing Iranian influence in Syria.[12] Assad has not made significant progress on these issues since he rejoined the Arab League in May 2023. The lack of progress, in fact, assists Iranian interests in Syria. Iranian-backed militants profit from the Captagon trade.[13] Iranian-backed militants have also tried to shape the human geography around Syria, which the return of refugees could disrupt. [14]

Assad's rhetoric suggests that he pursued normalization with the Arab states to boost his international legitimacy but does not assign much urgency to further improving ties with them. Readmittance into the Arab League supports Assad's efforts to frame his regime as the formal government for all of Syria. Iran and Russia have aided Assad's push to reenter the Arab League and have meanwhile continued to expand their own ties with his regime.[15] Assad's reassertion of legitimacy and ruling capacity assists in the obfuscation of Iran and Russia's influence and territorial control in Syria.

Iranian Domestic and Political Affairs

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

Iranian officials insisted that they can spend freely the \$6 billion received as part of the recent prisoner swap agreement with the United States, rebuffing Western reports that Iran can only use the funds for humanitarian purposes. The agreement involves Iran releasing five US nationals in exchange for the United States allowing the release of \$6 billion of frozen Iranian financial assets in South Korea.[16] The Iranian Foreign Affairs Ministry claimed on August 11 that "the decision on how to use these unfrozen resources and financial assets lies with the Islamic Republic of Iran." [17] A media adviser to Iran's negotiating team, Mohammad Marandi, separately claimed on August 11 that Iran has "full and direct access" to the unfrozen assets.[18] Marandi added that "no Qatari company" will control the unfrozen funds, referring to Western media reports that the United States will transfer the funds to the Qatari central bank.[19] Iranian Vice President for Political Affairs Mohammad Jamshidi lastly indicated that Iran will not allow the US nationals to leave the country until the funds are "completely transferred." [20] Jamshidi did not specify whether he meant the transfer of the unfrozen assets to Qatar's central bank or to Iran.

The Iranian regime could use the unfrozen funds for various purposes domestically and abroad. The funds would help Iran implement its 2023 fiscal budget and stimulate the struggling Iranian economy, as CTP previously reported.[21] The funds could go toward financing infrastructure projects and stabilizing the Iranian rial. Iran could also use some of these funds to support its proxy and partner militias throughout the Middle East.

Iranian state media focused predominantly on celebrating the agreement with the United States and framing it as a victory for Iran on August 11. *Tasnim News Agency* framed the agreement as an important success for regime efforts to stabilize the currency.[22] *Iran Press* separately described the prisoner swap agreement as Iran's "authoritative" agreement with the Biden administration.[23] An outlet tied to the Ebrahim Raisi administration inflated how much money Tehran is receiving as part of the agreement, claiming that the regime will receive over \$10 billion.[24]

The news of the agreement appears to have had an immediate positive impact on the value of the rial. The currency appreciated over two percent overnight.[25] This slight appreciation follows

months of continued devaluation and high inflation rates. It is unclear, however, whether the rial will continue this positive momentum.

Iran Update, August 14, 2023

Iran Update, August 14, 2023

Ashka Jhaveri, Johanna Moore, Annika Ganzeveld, Amin Soltani, Peter Mills, Brian Carter, and Nicholas Carl

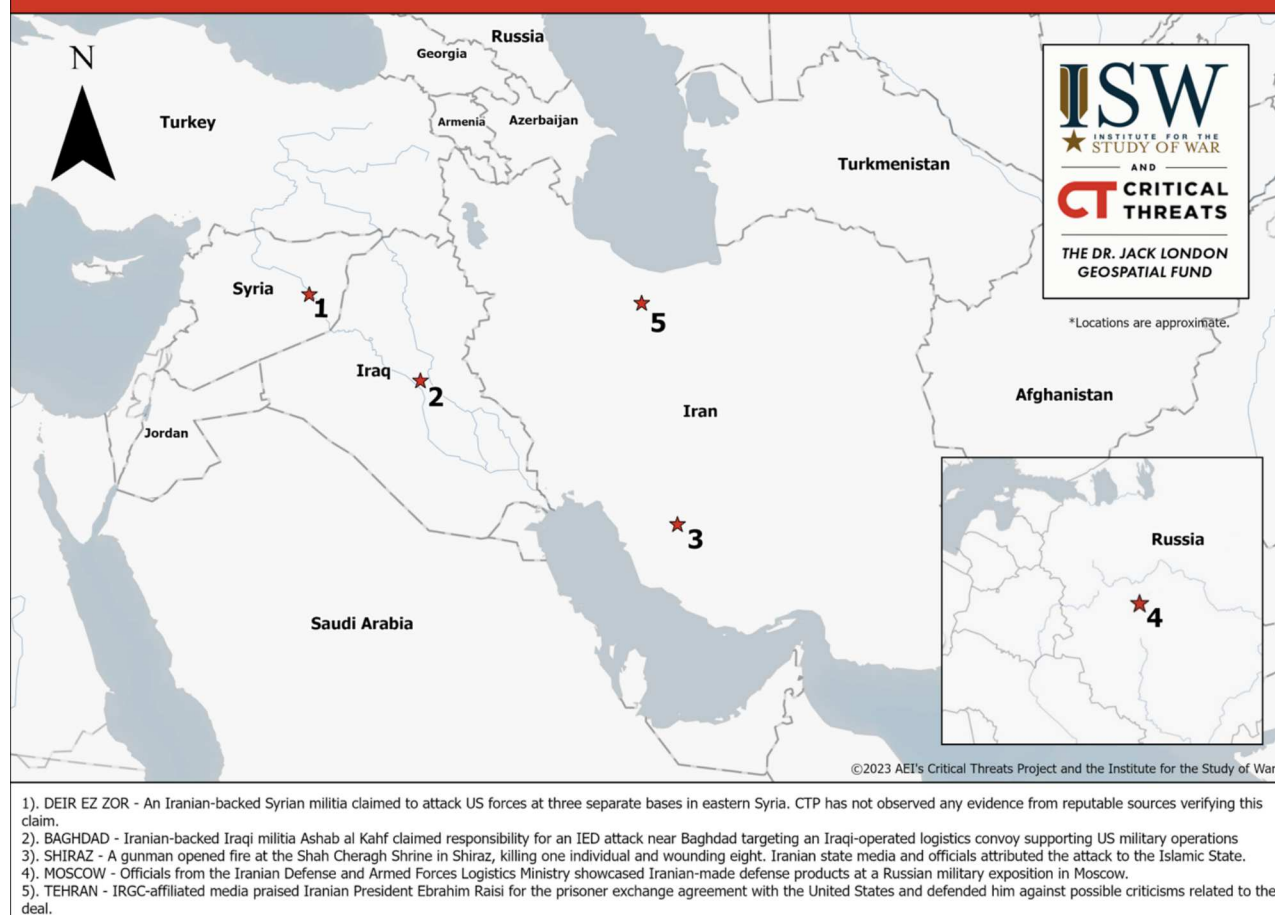
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Key Takeaways

1. An Iranian-backed Syrian militia claimed to attack US forces at three separate bases in eastern Syria. CTP has not observed any evidence from reputable sources verifying this claim.
2. Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Ashab al Kahf claimed responsibility for an IED attack near Baghdad targeting an Iraqi-operated logistics convoy supporting US military operations
3. A gunman opened fire at the Shah Cheragh Shrine in Shiraz, killing one individual and wounding eight. Iranian state media and officials attributed the attack to the Islamic State.
4. Officials from the Iranian Defense and Armed Forces Logistics Ministry showcased Iranian-made defense products at a Russian military exposition in Moscow.
5. IRGC-affiliated media praised Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi for the prisoner exchange agreement with the United States and defended him against possible criticisms related to the deal.

Iran Update | August 14, 2023



Iranian Activities in the Levant

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

An Iranian-backed militia—named the Popular Resistance in the Eastern Region—claimed to attack US forces at three separate bases in eastern Syria on August 12.ⁱ CTP has not observed any evidence from reputable sources verifying this claim. Media outlets affiliated with the Iranian, Russian, and Syrian regimes circulated this attack claim. Russian state media has previously reported false attack claims on US positions in Syria.ⁱⁱ Neither the United States nor local Syrian outlets have indicated that the attacks occurred.

The Popular Resistance in the Eastern Region has repeatedly made unverifiable claims of attacking US forces and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) since its inception in 2018.ⁱⁱⁱ The group has reportedly operated out of Raqqa in SDF-controlled territory and has the stated intention of liberating Deir ez Zor Province from Syrian opposition control.^{iv} The Washington Institute for Near East Policy assessed in April 2018 that the militia may be an Iranian front group based on its similarities to the Iranian-backed Baqir Brigade.^v The Baqir Brigade has reportedly trained the Popular Resistance group and participated with them in demonstrations opposing SDF-control.^{vi} The iconography of the groups' logo is consistent with other Axis of Resistance groups, such as Lebanese Hezbollah and the Popular Mobilization Forces.

The Popular Resistance group claiming attacks on US forces is consistent with the recent Iranian information operation to frame the United States as an imminent threat to local Syrians. CTP previously assessed that Iran, Russia, and the Syrian regime are amplifying this information

operation as part of a campaign to coerce US forces to leave Syria. Part of this information operation has involved blaming the United States for recent ISIS activity.^{vii} Iran, Russia, and the Syrian regime seek to provoke animosity toward the United States among the local population, which could motivate locals in eastern Syria to attack US or SDF targets.

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 militia Ashab al Kahf claimed responsibility on August 13 for an IED attack near Baghdad targeting an Iraqi-operated logistics convoy supporting US military operations.

[1] The group released a video purportedly showing the attack. CTP cannot verify the attack, however, given the poor video quality and visual effects. This IED attack is the fourth that Ashab al Kahf has claimed targeting logistics convoys supporting the US military presence in Iraq since July 2023.[2]

Ashab al Kahf has consistently been the most publicly aggressive of the Iranian-backed Iraqi militias in recent months. The group has called for protests outside the US embassy in Baghdad twice in recent months, for instance.[3] CTP previously assessed that this rhetoric and IED attack campaign is meant to present Ashab al Kahf as ideologically committed to resisting and expelling US forces from Iraq and thereby maintain support among its base.[4]

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.

A gunman opened fire at the Shah Cheragh Shrine in Shiraz, Fars Province on August 13, killing one individual and wounding eight.[5] This attack marks the second on the Shah Cheragh Shrine—a prominent Shia site—in less than a year. The Afghan branch of the Islamic State—named Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)—previously conducted an attack on the location in October 2022, killing 15 individuals.[6] Iranian authorities reportedly arrested ten foreign nationals in connection to the August 13 attack but did not specify their nationality.[7]

Iranian state media and officials attributed the August 13 attack to the Islamic State, although the group has not claimed responsibility at the time of this writing.[8] The pattern of ISKP activity in Iran and the background of the attacker suggests that ISKP specifically is responsible. There is furthermore precedent for such an attack given ISKP's involvement in the October 2022 attack.[9] Continued Iranian operations against ISKP in Sistan and Baluchistan and Fars provinces in May and August 2023 indicate ISKP cells continue to operate in Iran.[10] Iranian state media reported the attacker was a Tajik national from northeastern Afghanistan, which also suggests ISKP involvement.[11] ISKP has expanded recruitment of Tajiks through its propaganda output in Tajik since early 2022, and CTP has assessed previously that ISKP has sufficient ground lines of communication between Iran and northern Afghanistan to facilitate an attack in Iran.[12]

The August 13 attack will likely exacerbate tensions between the Iranian regime and the Afghan Taliban. Iranian officials have not explicitly linked the attack to Afghanistan, although Parliamentary National Security and Foreign Policy Committee member Fada Hossein Maleki stated on August 14 that Iranian security services are identifying Afghan migrants in Iran with the “potential” to join the Islamic State.[13] The regime has frequently pressured the Taliban to adopt stronger counterterrorism measures and has held numerous meetings with neighboring countries in recent months to discuss security concerns emanating from Afghanistan.[14] The August 13 attack compounds existing Iranian grievances toward the Taliban, moreover. Iranian officials have repeatedly accused the Taliban of depriving Iran of Helmand River water in recent months. Tensions over water rights reached a high point in May 2023, with Iranian and Afghan border

guards engaging in a brief and lethal clash near the Milak-Zaranj border.[15] The confluence of security threats facing Iran places the regime in a difficult position as it attempts to balance its fragile relationship with the Taliban while simultaneously ensuring domestic stability.

Officials from the Iranian Defense and Armed Forces Logistics Ministry showcased Iranian-made defense products at a Russian military exposition in Moscow on August 14.[16] The Iranian officials displayed miniature replicas of a variety of Iranian air defense systems, drones, and missiles, among other munitions and platforms. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu visited the Iranian stand. Russian military bloggers highlighted the Balaban guided glide bomb and Sadid-365 anti-tank guided munition, claiming that Russian Su-25 aircraft could carry these weapons.[17]

CTP presents below the basic capabilities of the drones showcased in Moscow:

- Arash-2
 - Role: Multirole
 - Range: 1,000-2,000 km
 - Launch system: JATO launcher
 - Munitions:
 - Unknown, could include up to 30 kilograms (66 pounds) of explosives[18]
 - Mohajer-6:
 - Role: Multirole
 - Range: 200-2,000 km
 - Launch system: runway
 - Munitions:
 - § Almas guided anti-tank missiles
 - § Ghaem guided glide bombs[19]
 - Karrar:
 - Role: Multirole
 - Range: 800-1,000 km
 - Launch system: pneumatic catapult
 - Munitions:
 - Azarakhsh guided missiles
 - Balaban guided bombs
 - GBU-12 laser-guided general-purpose bombs
 - Kowsar medium-range guided anti-ship cruise missiles
 - Shafagh laser-guided missiles
 - Simorgh cluster bombs
 - Yasin long-range guided glide bombs
 - § 500-pound laser guided MK-82

- bombs[20]
 - Shahed-129
 - Role:
Multirole
 - Range:
1,700 km
 - Launch
system:
runway
 - Munition
s:
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IRGC-affiliated media praised Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi for the prisoner exchange agreement with the United States and defended him against possible criticisms related to the deal. The agreement involves Iran releasing five US nationals in exchange for the United States allowing the release of \$6 billion of frozen Iranian financial assets in South Korea.[23] *Tasnim News Agency* published on August 14 an article touting Raisi's success in securing the release of these financial assets.[24] The article also criticized his predecessor and political rival, Hassan Rouhani, for failing to do so. *Fars News Agency* separately rejected Western media reports that Iran had significantly slowed its enrichment of 60 percent uranium and diluted part of its highly enriched uranium stockpile as part of the prisoner exchange deal.[25] This framing from IRGC-affiliated media is consistent with the political support that many senior IRGC officers have given Raisi in recent years and especially since he became president in August 2021.

Iran Update, August 15, 2023

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Amin Soltani, Annika Ganzeveld, Andie Parry, Ashka Jahveri, Johanna Moore

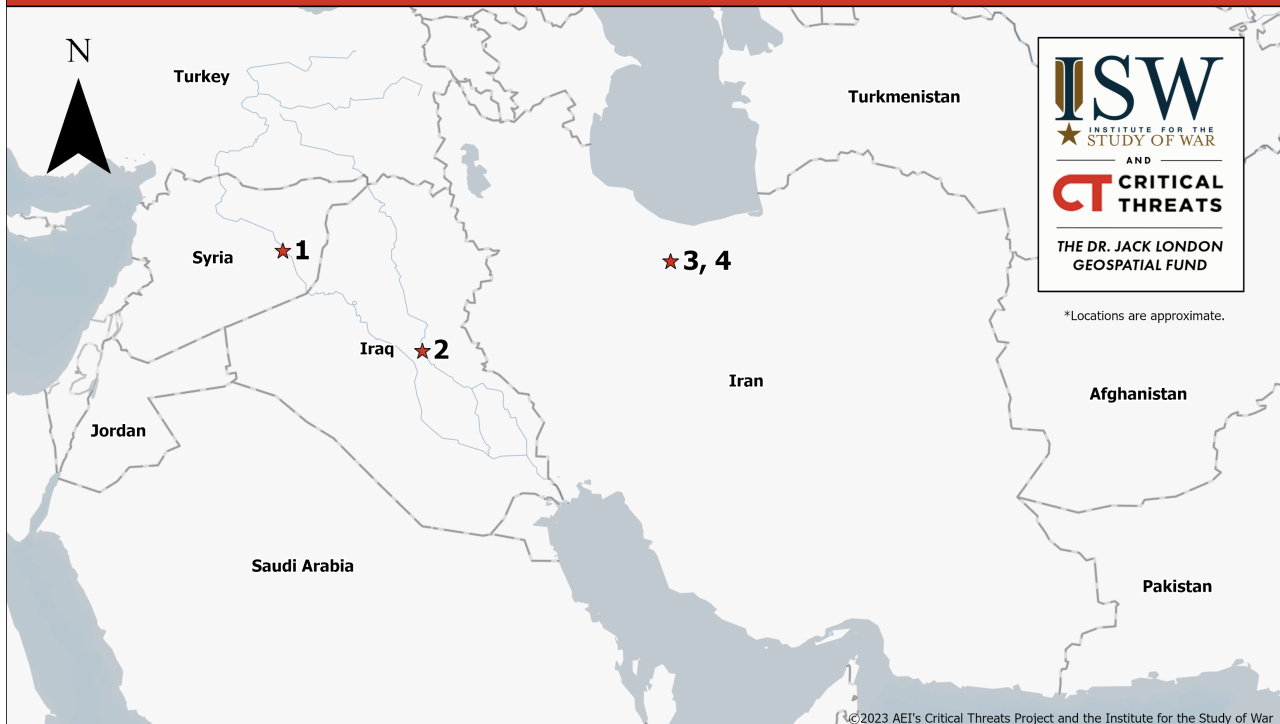
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The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) with support from the Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute launched an [interactive map of Iran and the Middle East](#). The map depicts events in Iran that affect the stability 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 shifted their state-run information operation from the false claim that US forces will imminently attack Syrian-regime controlled territory and are instead alleging that United States supported recent ISIS attacks. Axis of Resistance media, however, continue to falsely accuse the United States of preparing to attack Syrian-regime controlled territory.
2. IRGC Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani met with Shia Coordination Framework leadership in Baghdad on August 15. Ghaani's stop in Baghdad was the latest in a series of meetings with members of Iran's Axis of Resistance in Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria.
3. Iranian state media signaled the regime's frustration with the Taliban on the two-year anniversary of the group's takeover of Afghanistan. This is a change from the conciliatory tone Iranian officials have recently adopted toward the Taliban.
4. Iranian Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi appointed Qom Provincial Governor Mohammad Taghi Shah Cheraghi as Interior Ministry Political Deputy and head of Iran's Election Headquarters on August 15. Shah Cheraghi could play a role in formulating the regime's responses to anticipated security threats in the coming months.

Iran Update | August 15, 2023



1. DEIR EZ ZOR - Iran and the Syrian regime shifted their state-run information operation from the false claim that US forces will imminently attack Syrian-regime controlled territory and are instead alleging that United States supported recent ISIS attacks. Axis of Resistance media, however, continue to falsely accuse the United States of preparing to attack Syrian-regime controlled territory.
2. BAGHDAD - IRGC Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani met with Shia Coordination Framework leadership in Baghdad on August 15. Ghaani's stop in Baghdad was the latest in a series of meetings with members of Iran's Axis of Resistance in Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria.
3. TEHRAN - Iranian state media signaled the regime's frustration with the Taliban on the two-year anniversary of the group's takeover of Afghanistan. This is a change from the conciliatory tone Iranian officials have recently adopted toward the Taliban.
4. TEHRAN - Iranian Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi appointed Qom Provincial Governor Mohammad Taghi Shah Cheraghi as Interior Ministry Political Deputy and head of Iran's Election Headquarters on August 15. Shah Cheraghi could play a role in formulating the regime's responses to anticipated security threats in the coming months.

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 shifted their state-run information operation from the false claim that US forces will imminently attack Syrian-regime controlled territory and are instead alleging that United States supported recent ISIS attacks. Iran, Russia, and the Syrian regime are coordinating an information operation that falsely claimed their deployments to Deir ez Zor were to protect against a US-SDF attack into regime-controlled territory, as ISW and CTP previously reported.^[1] Iranian and Syrian state media had stopped messaging this claim by August 9 and are instead now accusing the United States of supporting ISIS in recent attacks.^[2] Axis of Resistance media, however, continue to falsely accuse the United States of preparing to attack Syrian-regime controlled territory.

- Iranian state news outlet *Islamic Republic of Iran News Agency (IRNA)* accused the United States of creating ISIS on August 14.^[3] Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Nasser Kanani incorrectly alluded to US support for ISIS on August 15 in saying that ISIS attacks have increased in Syria because ISIS receives intelligence, security and logistical support from the United States.^[4]
- Syrian-regime affiliated *Athr Press* reported on August 10 that the US Al Tanf garrison in southeastern Syria is the central point of a heightened military presence.^[5] The

Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs accused the United States on August 12 of supporting an ISIS attack on Syrian Arab Army (SAA) 17th Division forces in the Mayadin desert which resulted in over 40 casualties.^[6] The Syrian Defense Minister also blamed the United States for supporting terrorism on August 15 in a speech at the Moscow Conference on International Security.^[7]

- Lebanese Hezbollah-affiliated media *al Mayadeen* said on August 9 that US reinforcements to eastern Syria are to launch an attack on Albu Kamal.^[8] Lebanese Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah blamed the United States for ordering recent ISIS attacks in Syria, Iran, and Pakistan in a speech on August 14.^[9]

The shift in Iranian and Syrian-regime messaging is consistent with Iranian, Russian, and Syrian regime allegations over the last several years that the United States created, trained, and has funded ISIS.^[10] The spread of complementary narratives of US aggression in eastern Syria furthers Iran's goal of creating a grassroots resistance to US forces in eastern Syria.^[11]

CTP previously reported that an Iranian-backed militia—named the Popular Resistance in the Eastern Region—claimed to attack US forces at three separate bases in eastern Syria on August 12.^[12] The group's claim has failed to gain traction in eastern Syria even though Syrian regime-affiliated sources have circulated false statements since late June that the United States and allied forces in Syria intend to launch an offensive to retake regime-held towns.^[13] CTP has not observed Iranian, Russian, Syrian state affiliated media recirculate the claim. The information space in Syria remains hostile to the United States, however, as Iranian proxy media outlets continue to frame US forces as an imminent threat to locals.^[14]

Iranian Activities in Iraq

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IRGC Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani met with Shia Coordination Framework leadership in Baghdad on August 15.^[15] Ghaani met with Framework leadership to discuss the US-Iraq Joint Security Cooperation Dialogue that took place on August 7-8 and provincial elections scheduled for December 2023, according to a report from the independent Iraqi news agency *Shafaq*.^[16] The Shia Coordination Framework is a loosely aligned political coalition of pro-Iranian parties.^[17] Ghaani may have also discussed Axis operations in the region and/or recent IED attacks that the Iraqi Shia militia Ashab al Kahf conducted. Ghaani commonly meets with the leaders of Iranian-backed militias, some of whom are members of the Framework, during his trips to Baghdad. Ghaani. Ashab al Kahf has consistently been the most publicly aggressive of the Iranian-backed militias in recent months.^[18]

Ghaani's stop in Baghdad was the latest in a series of meetings with members of Iran's Axis of Resistance. Ghaani first traveled to Syria around August 3 to review Iranian forces deployed in Deir ez Zor Province.^[19] He then met with Lebanese Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah on August 6 in Beirut.^[20] CTP presented three possible issues Ghaani and Nasrallah may have discussed including LH forces deployed to eastern Syria, Lebanese domestic and border-related issues, and/or arming militants in the West Bank.^[21]

Iranian Domestic and Political Affairs

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

Iranian state media signaled the regime's frustration with the Taliban on the two-year anniversary of the group's takeover of Afghanistan, which is a change from the conciliatory

tone Iranian officials have recently adopted toward the Taliban. Iranian Ambassador to Afghanistan Hassan Kazemi Ghomi on August 10 blamed the United States for permitting the Islamic State's presence to grow inside Afghanistan and for instability in the country.[22] *Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA)* then criticized the Taliban on August 15, the two-year anniversary of the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan. *IRNA* maligned the Taliban for its inability to meet the security demands of neighboring states, such as Iran, that have repeatedly expressed concern over the Islamic State gaining strength inside Afghanistan.[23] *IRNA* also criticized the Taliban for refusing Iran access to water from the Helmand River.

Iranian officials have frequently stated the above grievances over the past two years without receiving any redress from the Taliban. The regime has frequently pressured the Taliban to adopt stronger counterterrorism measures and has held numerous meetings with neighboring countries in recent months to discuss security concerns emanating from Afghanistan.[24] Iranian officials have not explicitly linked the August 13 attack on the Shah Cheragh Shrine in Shiraz to Afghanistan. Parliamentary National Security and Foreign Policy Committee member Fada Hossein Maleki stated on August 14 that Iranian security services are identifying Afghan migrants in Iran with the "potential" to join the Islamic State, however.[25] The August 13 attack nevertheless compounds the existing Iranian grievances toward the Taliban. Tensions over water rights also reached a high point in May 2023, with Iranian and Afghan border guards engaging in a brief and lethal clash near the Milak-Zaranj border.[26] The confluence of security threats facing Iran places the regime in a difficult position as it attempts to balance its fragile relationship with the Taliban while simultaneously ensuring domestic stability.

Iranian Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi appointed Qom Provincial Governor Mohammad Taghi Shah Cheraghi as Interior Ministry Political Deputy and head of Iran's Election Headquarters on August 15.[27] The Interior Ministry Political Deputy is responsible for organizing elections, issuing protest licenses, and proposing governor candidates to the Interior Minister and Government Cabinet.[28] Shah Cheraghi is a former IRGC provincial corps commander and has familial connections to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.[29] CTP previously assessed that the Iranian regime tolerated the November 2022-May 2023 coordinated campaign to poison Iranian school girls, which was largely concentrated in Qom Province.[30] Shah Cheraghi was slow to respond to the crisis, only making his first public statement about the student poisonings on February 16, after more than 30 incidents had already occurred.[31] The first reported poisoning incident occurred in Qom on November 30.[32] Shah Cheraghi is additionally a strong advocate of the mandatory hijab and previously called for adopting "negative measures" against unveiled women.[33] It is unclear what Shah Cheraghi meant when using this term, however. The United States has not sanctioned Shah Cheraghi for his role in repressing women in Iran.

Shah Cheraghi could play a role in formulating the regime's responses to anticipated security threats in the coming months. Interior Ministry officials have voiced concerns about various security threats in recent months.[34] Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi stated on June 5 that Iran's enemies are attempting to disrupt the March 2024 parliamentary elections, for example.[35] The Interior Ministry is additionally concerned about Iranian women flouting the mandatory hijab law. The Law Enforcement Command (LEC), which operates under the Interior Ministry, resumed the country-wide deployment of its morality patrol officers to enforce mandatory veiling on July 16.[36] Iranians are planning protests to commemorate the LEC's killing of Mahsa Amini on September 16, 2022.[37] CTP reported on August 2 that Iranian leaders are discussing expanding the Basij, suppressing dissent in universities, and monitoring cyberspace to more effectively confront social unrest.[38]

Iran Update, August 16, 2023

Iran Update, August 16, 2023

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

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Key Takeaways

1. Qatar-based *Al Araby* reported that IRGC Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani ordered Iranian-backed militias in Iraq to suspend attacks against US targets. He specifically called for an end to an IED campaign that an Iranian-backed militia has waged against Iraqi-operated convoys supporting the US military presence in Iraq.
2. Iranian oil exports to China have increased by over 60 percent in August 2023. This growing energy cooperation is part of a broader deepening of Sino-Iranian ties, especially regarding economic relations and infrastructure development.
3. Iranian state media blamed the Afghan branch of the Islamic State—named Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)—for a recent terror attack in central Iran. This reporting from Iranian state media is the most explicit connection it has drawn yet between the attack and ISKP.
4. Armed Forces General Staff spokesperson Brigadier General Abol Fazl Shekarchi described the purpose of a recent Iranian military exercise in the Persian Gulf, affirming CTP's previous assessment of its intent.

Iran Update | August 16, 2023



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Iranian Activities in Iraq

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Qatar-based *Al Araby* reported that IRGC Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani ordered Iranian-backed militias in Iraq to suspend attacks against US targets.

[1] The article cited an unidentified source in the Shia Coordination Framework—the umbrella organization for Iranian-backed political parties in Iraq. This report comes after Ghaani traveled to Baghdad on August 15 to resolve differences between Iranian-backed parties and discuss the recent US-Iraq Joint Security Dialogue.[2] CTP cannot verify this report, but it is consistent with CTP's previous assessment that Ghaani may have ordered Iranian-backed militias to refrain from attacking US targets in Iraq during his last visit to Baghdad in June 2023.[3] It is also consistent with the reports that the US-Iran prisoner swap agreement is part of a broader understanding to reduce tensions between the United States and Iran and prevent Iranian-backed attacks against US positions.[4]

Ghaani specifically called for an end to an IED campaign that Ashab al Kahf—an Iranian-backed militia—has waged against Iraqi-operated convoys supporting the US military presence in Iraq. Ashab al Kahf has claimed responsibility for four IED attacks against such convoys since July 2023. Ashab al Kahf has consistently been the most publicly aggressive of the Iranian-backed militias toward the United States. The group has also called for two separate protests at the US embassy in Baghdad.[5] The Iranian-backed proxies that have gained political influence under Iraq Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani have rejected Ashab al Kahf's calls to protest and have instead emphasized diplomatic and political pressure against the United States.

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 oil exports to China have increased by over 60 percent in August 2023. These exports have risen from around 917,000 barrels per day (bpd) from January to July to around 1.5 million bpd thus far in August.[6] These reports are consistent with CTP's reporting on July 31 that Iran has sold approximately one million barrels of oil per day to China since January 2023.[7] This spike in Iranian oil exports to China is consistent with similar increases during the summer months of previous years.[8] Iran's export of 1.5 million bpd is significant, however, given that previous spikes never reached this level. Iranian oil exports to China have steadily increased since 2020, when Iran was exporting approximately 400,000 bpd.[9] This growing energy cooperation is part of a broader deepening of Sino-Iranian ties, especially regarding economic relations and infrastructure development.

These oil sales to China could yield the Iranian regime several benefits, to include the following:

- Iranian leaders will likely use the revenue to revitalize their economy and mitigate the impact of Western sanctions. Iran is facing poor economic conditions, with the value of the Iranian rial hovering around 490,000 rials to one US dollar as of August 16.[10] The rial was comparatively valued at around 298,200 rials to the dollar before the eruption of the anti-regime Mahsa Amini protest movement in September 2022.[11] The Iran Statistical Center reported in July 2023 that Iran's inflation rate is approximately 47.5 percent.[12] Increasing oil sales to China will generate greater capital inflows into Iran even though Iran is currently selling oil to China with an approximately \$20 per barrel discount.[13] The oil sales will also help Iran implement its 2023 fiscal budget which is dependent on selling 1.3 million bpd, however current sales fall short of Iran's desired \$85 per barrel.[14]
- Iranian leaders may obtain Chinese support in developing domestic infrastructure in exchange for some oil sales. An Iranian transportation official announced in July 2023 that Iran is conducting preliminary negotiations involving China constructing roads connecting Tehran to the Caspian Sea in exchange for Iranian oil.[15] Iran has also called for Chinese investment in developing an Iran-Afghanistan-China railway corridor.[16] Developing such infrastructure projects would support the larger Iranian effort to transform the country into a regional and international transit hub.[17]

Iranian state media blamed the Afghan branch of the Islamic State — named Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) — for a recent terror attack in central Iran. A gunman opened fire at the Shah Cheragh Shrine in Shiraz, Fars Province on August 13.[18] IRGC-affiliated *Tasnim News Agency* reported on August 16 that the perpetrator joined the Islamic State in Turkey and then traveled to Afghanistan to receive three months of training.[19] This reporting is consistent with CTP's previous assessment that ISKP is likely directing cells in Turkey.[20] It is also consistent with CTP's previous observation that the perpetrator's background and the historic pattern of ISKP activity in Iran indicates that ISKP was responsible for the attack.[21]

This reporting from Iranian state media is the most explicit connection the regime has drawn between the attack and ISKP. Iranian state media previously reported that the perpetrator was a Tajik national from northeastern Afghanistan.[22] However, that report did not claim he received training in Afghanistan with the Islamic State as the more recent reporting does. ISKP has expanded recruitment of Tajiks—who, along with Uzbeks, make up the majority of the population in northern Afghanistan—through its propaganda output in Tajik since early 2022.[23]

This attack on the Shah Cheragh Shrine will likely exacerbate tensions between Iran and the Afghan Taliban, as CTP previously reported.[24] Tehran has repeatedly pushed the Taliban to adopt stronger counterterrorism measures since the Taliban came to power in August 2021. ISKP previously conducted an attack on the Shah Cheragh Shrine in October 2022.[25] These attacks compound with additional Iranian grievances toward the Taliban, moreover. Tensions have risen

between Iran and the Taliban over water resources in recent months. The confluence of issues related to Afghanistan places Tehran in a difficult position as it tries to balance its fragile relationship with the Taliban while also ensuring domestic stability.

Armed Forces General Staff spokesperson Brigadier General Abol Fazl Shekarchi described the purpose of a recent Iranian military exercise in the Persian Gulf, affirming CTP's previous assessment of its intent.[26] The IRGC Navy conducted a well-covered naval exercise around the island of Abu Musa on August 2.[27] Shekarchi stated on August 16 that the exercise was meant to send messages to the Gulf states and to the United States.[28] The IRGC firstly sought to assert Iranian control over the disputed islands of Abu Musa and Greater and Lesser Tunbs, which the UAE has also made similar territorial claims to.[29] The IRGC also meant to signal that the military presence of extra-regional states, such as the United States, should come to an end.[30] The IRGC was specifically responding to the recent buildup of US military forces around the Persian Gulf.[31] CTP assessed these messages in our August 2 update.[32]

Iran Update, August 18, 2023

Iran Update, August 18, 2023

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

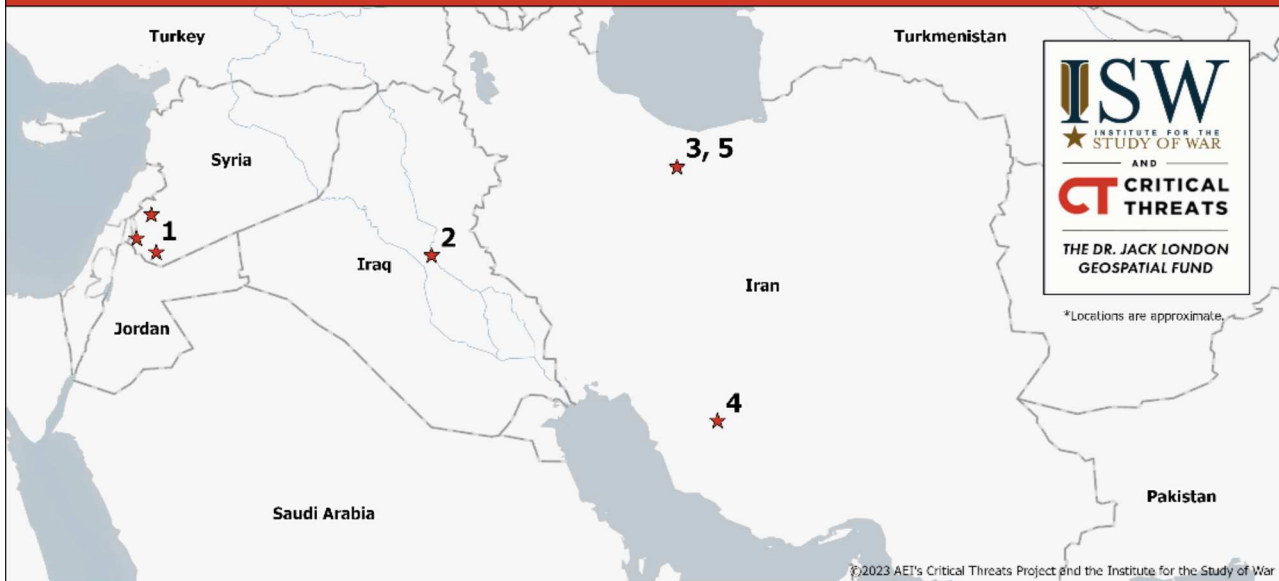
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Key Takeaways

1. Protests against the Syrian regime expanded across three southern Syrian provinces. This expansion is unsurprising given that it is a Friday—the first day of the weekend in Syria.
2. Iranian-backed political actors in Iraq are spreading disinformation framing the United States as dangerous and hostile. This disinformation is similar to the narrative that Iran, Russia, and the Syrian regime have amplified in eastern Syria since June 2023.
3. The Iranian regime is trying to deter and preempt protests ahead of the anniversary of Mahsa Amini's death on September 16. These actions highlight the regime's enduring commitment to repression.
4. The Iranian regime officially connected a recent terror attack in central Iran to the Afghan branch of the Islamic State. The attack will likely exacerbate mounting tensions between Iran and the Afghan Taliban.
5. The Ebrahim Raisi administration is continuing its diplomatic campaign to convince BRICS countries to admit Iran ahead of the 15th annual BRICS summit in South Africa on August 22-24. Iran faces significant diplomatic hurdles to joining BRICS, however.

Iran Update | August 18, 2023



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Protests calling for the fall of the Syrian regime expanded across three southern Syrian provinces on August 18. Protesters gathered in at least 15 towns across Daraa, Suwayda, and Rif Dimashq provinces to protest economic conditions and regime mismanagement.[1] One protester group issued a statement declaring its non-recognition of the Syrian regime, calling the regime "usurped by the Russian occupier and Iranian militias." [2] Protests and strikes initially erupted on August 16 after Syrian President Bashar al Assad adjusted bus prices and cut fuel subsidies.[3] The uptick in protest activity on August 18 is unsurprising given that it is a Friday—the first day of the weekend in Syria. It is unclear whether these protests will sustain their momentum into the days ahead.

The southern Syrian provinces of Daraa and Suwayda are prone to this kind of anti-regime unrest. Residents similarly called for the fall of the regime over economic conditions in December 2022, for instance.[4]

Iranian Activities in Iraq

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Iranian-backed political actors in Iraq are spreading disinformation framing the United States as dangerous and hostile. Elements of the Shia Coordination Framework—the umbrella organization for Iranian-backed political parties in Iraq—are primarily responsible for spreading this disinformation. An Iraqi parliamentarian associated with the framework claimed that the United States had deployed 2,500 additional military personnel to Ain al Assad airbase in western Iraq and suggested that the United States did so without the consent of the Iraqi central government.[5] An unidentified Shia Coordination Framework member claimed that the United States deployed these forces to create a buffer zone along the Iraq-Syria border.[6] According to the same source, US Ambassador to Iraq Alina Romanowski threatened that the United States would conduct airstrikes on Popular Mobilization Forces units in the area if they do not leave. These reports began to circulate shortly after IRGC Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani met with Shia Coordination Framework members and Iranian-backed Iraqi factions in Baghdad between August 15 and 16.[7] Romanowski and Major General Matthew McFarlane—the commanding general of the Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve—both denied all of these rumors and clarified that the recent deployments are part of regular troops rotations.[8]

This disinformation identifies the United States as a belligerent in Iraq similar to disinformation that Iran, Russia, and the Syrian regime have amplified in eastern Syria since June 2023. CTP previously assessed that Iran, Russia, and the Syrian regime were conducting an information operation as part of a coordinated coercion campaign to pressure the United States to withdraw its forces from Syria.[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 trying to deter protest activity ahead of the anniversary of Mahsa Amini’s killing on September 16. Iranian officials, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, have expressed concern in recent weeks about anticipated unrest surrounding the anniversary. [10] Security officials have called on their forces to prepare for potential unrest and have threatened violence against dissidents.[11] The regime has furthermore begun taking measures to preempt potential demonstrations. These actions highlight the regime’s enduring commitment to repression.

- The Intelligence and Security Ministry arrested on August 17 twelve individuals planning to “incite chaos and vandalism” on the anniversary in Gilan Province.[12] The ministry accused these individuals of having previously participated in the Mahsa Amini protests. Western media reported on August 18 that the arrested individuals are women’s rights activists.[13]
- Regime security forces deployed to Boukan, West Azerbaijan Province on August 18, according to social media claims.[14] This movement of forces to Boukan is noteworthy given that the Mahsa Amini protests heavily concentrated in northwestern Iran. Around 21 percent of the anti-regime protests between September 16 and December 22, 2022, occurred in Kurdistan and West Azerbaijan provinces.[15]

The Iranian regime officially connected a recent terror attack in central Iran to the Afghan branch of the Islamic State—named Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). A gunman opened fire at the Shah Cheragh shrine in Shiraz, Fars Province on August 13, killing one individual and wounding eight.[16] The Iranian Intelligence and Security Ministry announced on August 18 that the attacker was a Tajik national who received training from ISKP in northern Afghanistan for several months prior to the attack.[17] This statement is consistent with previous claims from Iranian officials and state media but is the first time that the regime connected ISKP to the attack.[18] CTP previously assessed that the attack will likely exacerbate mounting tensions between Iran and the Afghan Taliban.[19]

The Ebrahim Raisi administration is continuing its diplomatic campaign to convince BRICS countries to admit Iran ahead of the 15th annual BRICS summit in South Africa on August 22-24. Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi discussed BRICS and transportation cooperation in separate phone calls with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Indian President Narendra Modi on August 17 and 18, respectively.[20] Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian similarly discussed Iran joining BRICS in a phone call with his Brazilian counterpart, Mauro Vieira, on August 18.[21] These engagements come as Iranian officials have repeatedly advocated for Iranian membership in BRICS in recent weeks, as CTP has continually reported. Iranian leaders seek to join BRICS as part of their effort to cooperate with other revisionist states to establish a parallel international order and challenge Western “dominance.”[22] Joining BRICS could furthermore help Iran mitigate the impact of Western sanctions, as CTP previously assessed.[23]

Iran faces significant diplomatic hurdles to joining BRICS, however. Brazil reportedly opposes adding new members to the organization.[24] South African officials have expressed concerns that Iran hopes for BRICS to become an anti-Western bloc.[25] Russian officials have expressed optimism that Iran will eventually join BRICS but have nevertheless expressed doubt that it will happen in the upcoming annual summit.[26]

Iran Update, August 21, 2023

Iran Update, August 21, 2023

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

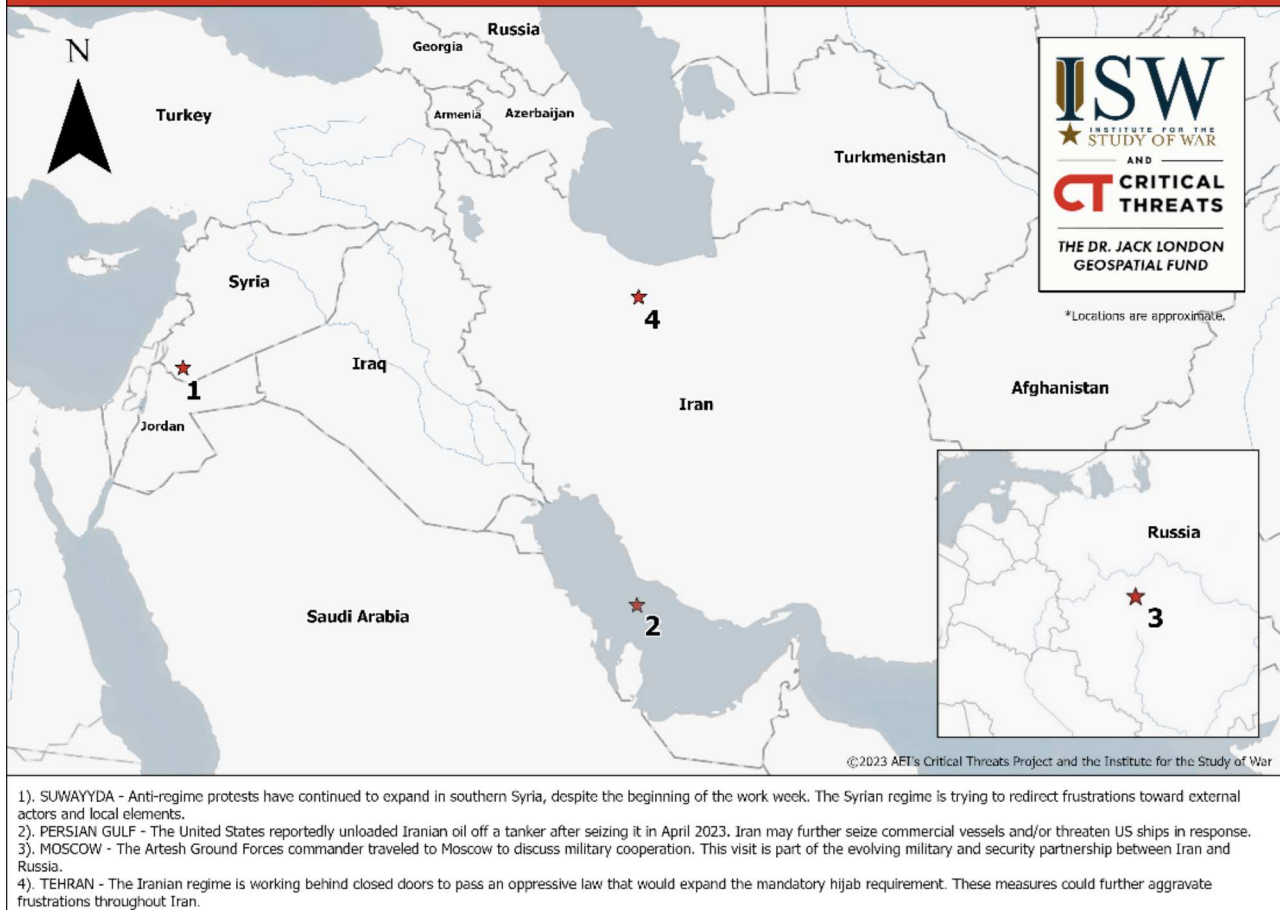
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Key Takeaways

1. Anti-regime protests have continued to expand in southern Syria, despite the beginning of the work week. The Syrian regime is trying to redirect frustrations toward external actors and local elements.
2. The United States reportedly unloaded Iranian oil off a tanker after seizing it in April 2023. Iran may further seize commercial vessels and/or threaten US ships in response.
3. The Artesh Ground Forces commander traveled to Moscow to discuss military cooperation. This visit is part of the evolving military and security partnership between Iran and Russia.
4. The Iranian regime is working behind closed doors to pass an oppressive law that would expand the mandatory hijab requirement. These measures could further aggravate frustrations throughout Iran.

Iran Update | August 21, 2023



Iranian Activities in the Levant

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

Anti-regime protests in southern Syria have continued to expand, despite the beginning of the work week. Demonstrations and strikes initially erupted on August 16 after Syrian President Bashar al Assad adjusted bus prices and cut fuel subsidies.[1] Syrian opposition outlets reported that in Suwayda Province protests occurred in 42 towns on August 20 and 21 towns on August 21. [2] Demonstrations also reportedly occurred in Daraa and Rif Dimashq provinces, although of smaller scope and size.[3] CTP cannot independently verify all of these protests. Many towns in Suwayda province participated in a general strike on August 20 and 21 as well, which halted transit through the province and closed business and government offices.[4] Both Arab Bedouin tribes and Druze residents participated in the strike and demonstrations, revealing the cross-sectarian economic grievances with the Syrian regime.[5]

Syrian regime officials and sources have blamed the unrest on external actors and local elements to redirect public frustrations. A Syrian military blogger claimed that the United States and Israel have stoked the protests.[6] The Syrian Electricity Minister similarly argued that the presence of US forces in Syria caused the current energy crisis.[7] Syrian state media furthermore reported that protest organizers forced shop owners to participate in the strikes.[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.

Western media reported that the United States unloaded Iranian oil off the *Suez Rajan* tanker on August 20.[9] The United States seized the vessel in April 2023 as part of its efforts to enforce sanctions on Iran.[10] The Artesh and IRGC navies seized several commercial tankers in the Persian Gulf from April to July 2023 in response, triggering a cycle of military buildup and demonstrations between the United States and Iran.[11] The United States has increased its military presence in the Persian Gulf in recent months in response to these seizures and to protect the global energy trade.[12] The IRGC Navy has responded to that military buildup by conducting provocative military exercises in the Persian Gulf and harassing nearby US naval vessels.[13]

The Iranian regime may further seize commercial vessels and/or threaten US ships in response to the unloading of Iranian oil off the *Suez Rajan*. IRGC Navy Commander Rear Admiral Alireza Tangsiri threatened in July 2023 that Iran would hold the United States and US companies responsible for confiscating and unloading the oil off the tanker.[14]

Brigadier General Kiomars Heydari—the commander of the Artesh Ground Forces—traveled to Moscow to discuss military cooperation with senior Russian officials.[15] The Artesh is the conventional Iranian military, which has four subordinate services—the Ground Forces, Navy, Air Force, and Air Defense Force. Heydari visited a Russian military exhibition that showcased Iranian air defense systems, drones, and missiles on August 20.[16] Heydari later met with Russian Ground Forces Commander General Oleg Salyukov and agreed to increase cooperation on August 21.[17] Iranian state media reported that Heydari will also visit various Russian “training, technological, and operational centers” during his trip.[18]

Heydari’s visit to Moscow is part of the evolving military and security partnership between Iran and Russia. It is extremely rare for Artesh commanders to travel abroad, and CTP has not previously observed Heydari visiting Russia. Law Enforcement Commander Brigadier General Ahmad Reza Radan similarly traveled to Russia in June 2023, as CTP previously reported, marking the first instance that CTP could find of an officer in his position traveling to Moscow.[19] These visits come as Iran continues to militarily support the Russian invasion of Ukraine and continues to expand its economic and political cooperation with the Kremlin.

The Iranian regime is working behind closed doors to pass an oppressive law that would expand the mandatory hijab requirement to include other restrictions for women. The exact details of the legislation are unclear, but it will reportedly include provisions that would ban women from having painted nails and force women to wear the chador—a black head-to-toe covering—in universities.[20] Parliament has been reviewing the law since May 2023, and its Judicial and Legal Committee approved and sent the legislation to the ultraconservative Guardian Council for final approval on August 21.[21] The Guardian Council is the regime body responsible for reviewing and approving all legislation passed by Parliament. The committee used Article 85 of the Iranian constitution, which empowers Parliament to pass laws without public debate, to send the bill directly to the Guardian Council.[22] This legal maneuver means that Parliament will not have an opportunity to vote on the bill in an open session if the Guardian Council approves it. Parliament previously used Article 85 in 2021 to approve controversial legislation that expanded regime control over the domestic information space.[23] Iranian leaders’ continual emphasis on harshly enforcing the hijab requirement underscores yet again their unwillingness to compromise with their population and offer any concessions. These measures could further aggravate anti-regime frustrations throughout the country, which is especially significant given that there are anti-regime protests planned for the one-year anniversary of Mahsa Amini’s death on September 16.[24]

Iran Update, August 22, 2023

Iran Update, August 22, 2023

Andie Parry, 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](#).

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Key Takeaways

1. At least 21 anti-regime protests occurred in southern Syria. The Syrian regime is trying to prevent protests from spreading further.
2. The Iranian regime used its annual National Defense Industry Day holiday to highlight new military capabilities. The regime directed this messaging at foreign enemies and potential international buyers of Iranian defense products.
3. Iranian oil exports continue to surge, nearing pre-sanctions levels. Growing Iranian oil exports are part of Tehran's ongoing effort to circumvent and undermine US sanctions.

Iran Update | August 22, 2023



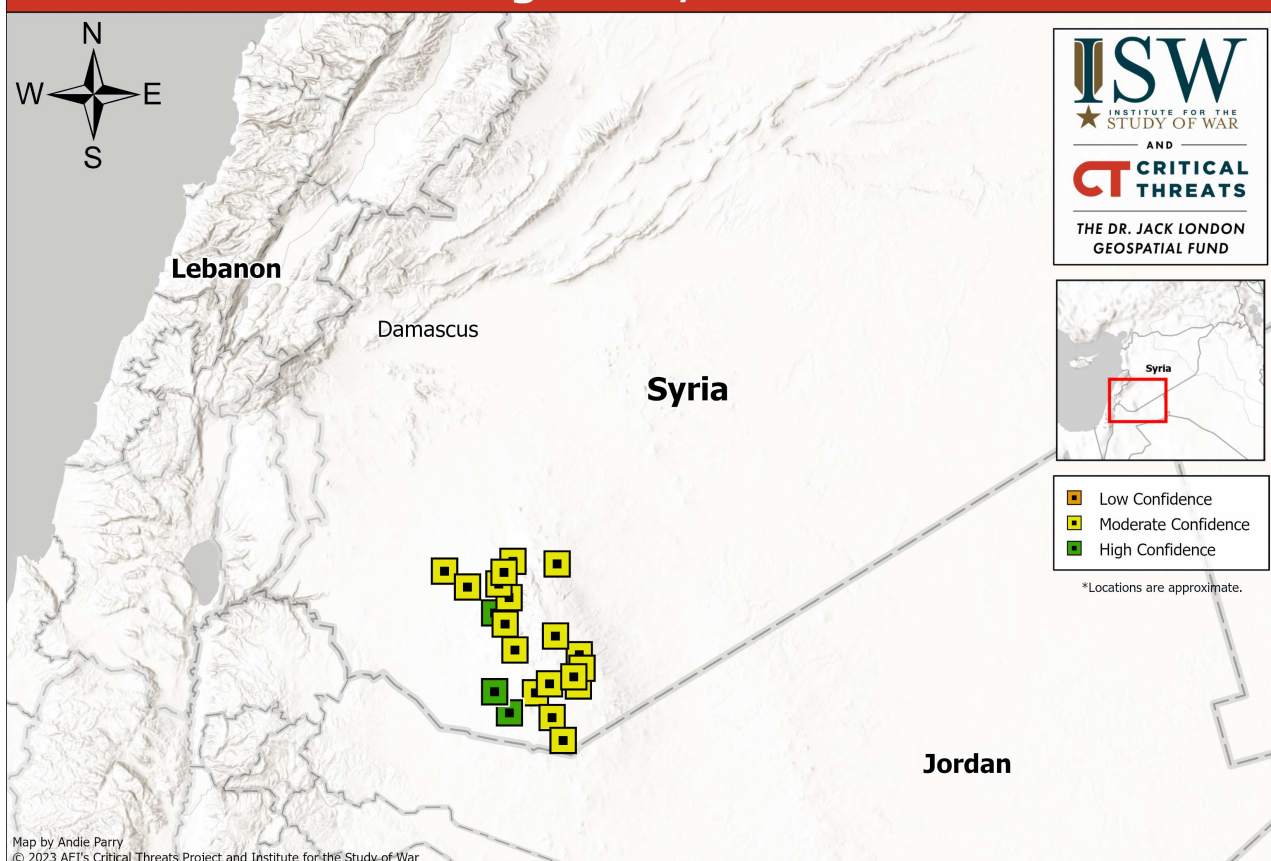
- 1). SUWAYDA - At least 21 anti-regime protests occurred in southern Syria. The Syrian regime is trying to prevent protests from spreading further.
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Iranian Activities in the Levant

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

At least 21 anti-regime protests occurred in the southern Syrian province of Suwayda on August 22. Local media reported higher numbers—around 35 protests—but CTP could only verify 21.[1] These protests initially erupted on August 16 after Syrian President Bashar al Assad adjusted bus prices and cut fuel subsidies.[2] The largest protest on August 22—consisting of several hundred people—occurred in Suwayda City.[3] Suwayda locals furthermore have continued to strike and block roads with burning tires for the third consecutive day.[4] The protests are explicitly anti-regime and shut down government offices and Baath party headquarters.[5] Disaffected Syrians in other provinces, such as Homs, Latakia, and Tartous, have expressed solidarity with the demonstrators.[6]

Protest Activity in Syria as of August 22, 3:00 PM ET



Syrian state security services and pro-regime forces are trying to prevent the protests from spreading to additional provinces. Syrian regime personnel clashed with protesters in Daraa Province on August 20 and 21 and are preparing to disperse protests in Deir ez Zor Province.[7] The regime personnel in Deir ez Zor City constructed dirt barriers around their headquarters and began patrols on main streets on August 22.[8] Pro-regime militias furthermore deployed to previous protest locations in Rif Dimashq Province on August 21.[9] CTP has previously reported on how worsening conditions in eastern Syrian have driven local unrest.[10]

Iran has supported crackdowns on anti-Assad protests in Syria previously and could intervene if protests continue to expand and threaten the Assad regime. Iranian state security services deployed to Syria in 2011 to suppress the popular uprising against Assad.[11] Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei appointing Brigadier General Ahmad Reza Radan as the top Iranian law enforcement commander in January 2023 is noteworthy in this context.[12] Radan is a career Iranian security officer with a long history of violently suppressing internal dissent. Radan, moreover, was part of the Iranian delegations that traveled to Damascus in 2011 to assist Assad in cracking down on the Syrian people. The current protests in Syria have not yet expanded to a level that seriously threatens the stability of the Syrian regime. CTP is nevertheless monitoring the situation for indications that the protests will grow more severe or that Iran will intervene.

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 used its annual National Defense Industry Day holiday to highlight new military capabilities. The Defense and Armed Forces Logistics Ministry unveiled the Mohajer-10 attack drone, Sina kamikaze drone, and Arman-1 glide bomb during the holiday ceremony on August 22.[13] Iranian state media reported that the Mohajer-10 can carry a greater diversity of

weapons and has a longer range and double the payload capacity than the Mohajer-6, which is the previous variant of this platform.[14] The defense ministry also transferred Haj Ghassem and Khorramshahr medium-range ballistic missiles to the IRGC Aerospace Force.[15] Iranian leaders have used this occasion and its leadup to boast about their growing military capabilities, which is consistent with the kind of regime rhetoric that is common around this holiday.[16]

The regime sought to use the holiday to send messages to both adversaries and potential partners.

- The regime used the holiday to signal its capability to attack enemy targets, particularly Israeli positions. Iranian state media published a threatening video of the drone with Persian- and Hebrew-language messages that read “prepare your bunkers.”[17] Iranian state media boasted that Western and Israeli media are closely monitoring the recent unveiling of new Iranian platforms.[18]
- The regime used the holiday to showcase its defense industry to potential international buyers. Iranian military leaders frequently express their desire for Iran to become a prominent arms seller and boast that many countries are interested in buying Iranian defense products.[19] Regime officials recently showcased Iranian-made air defense equipment, drones, and missiles, among other defense products, at a military exhibition in Moscow on August 14.[20] Iranian leaders seek to leverage arms sales to generate much-needed revenue for their worsening economy.

Iranian oil exports continue to surge, nearing pre-sanctions levels. Iran has exported approximately 2.2 million barrels per day (bpd) thus far in August 2023.[21] These exports have primarily gone to China, which tends to import more Iranian oil during the summer months.[22] Iran previously exported around 2.5 million bpd in April 2018—one month before the United States withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.[23] Iranian oil exports fell dramatically in the following years but began to slowly increase beginning in 2020, when Iran was only exporting around 400,000 bpd.[24] The growing Iranian oil exports are part of Tehran’s ongoing effort to circumvent and undermine US sanctions. Iranian leaders will likely use their growing oil revenues to stimulate their economy and develop domestic transportation infrastructure, as CTP previously argued.[25]

[1] <https://www.facebook.com/Suwayda24/posts/pfbid0sQKnri4oTmPTUE4pq5wsKq74a...>

[2] <https://sana dot sy/?p=1949471> ; <https://t.me/SyrianPresidency/3998>; <https://sana dot sy/?p=1949920>

[3] <https://www.syriahr.com/en/308231/> ; <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=611995500973356>

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[8] [https://eyeofeuphrates \(dot\) com/ar/news/2023/08/22/9485](https://eyeofeuphrates (dot) com/ar/news/2023/08/22/9485)

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[10] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-august-17-2023>

[11] https://www.facebook.com/kataeb.reef.sy/posts/619490553672001?ref=embed_...

[12] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-january-7-2023>

[13] <https://www.tasnimnews dot com/fa/news/1402/05/31/2944759> ; <https://defapress dot ir/fa/news/611803>

- [14] <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1402/05/31/2944759> ; <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-builds-advanced-mohajer-d...>
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- [24] https://www.eia.gov/international/content/analysis/countries_long/Iran/p...
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Iran Update, August 23, 2023

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

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. At least 16 anti-regime protests occurred in the southern Syrian provinces of Suwayda and Daraa on August 23. The protests have gained popular support and activists are circulating calls for protests in Deir ez Zor Province on Thursday, August 24, and in all Syrian provinces on Friday, August 25.
2. Armed groups assassinated four pro-regime personnel, two of whom were from Iranian-backed groups, in eastern Syria between August 10 and August 22. Syrian regime forces refused to complete patrols in Mayadin City on August 23 following the assassinations.
3. The Supreme Leader's office showcased the Iranian regime's sponsorship of Palestinian resistance groups on August 22 after Israeli officials blamed Iran for kinetic activity in the West Bank.
4. Artesh Ground Forces Commander Brigadier General Kiomars Heydari traveled to Moscow between August 20-23. Heydari's visit to the border surveillance equipment center and comment about "terrorism" indicate that Iran seeks Russian assistance in enhancing its border security.

Iran Update | August 23, 2023

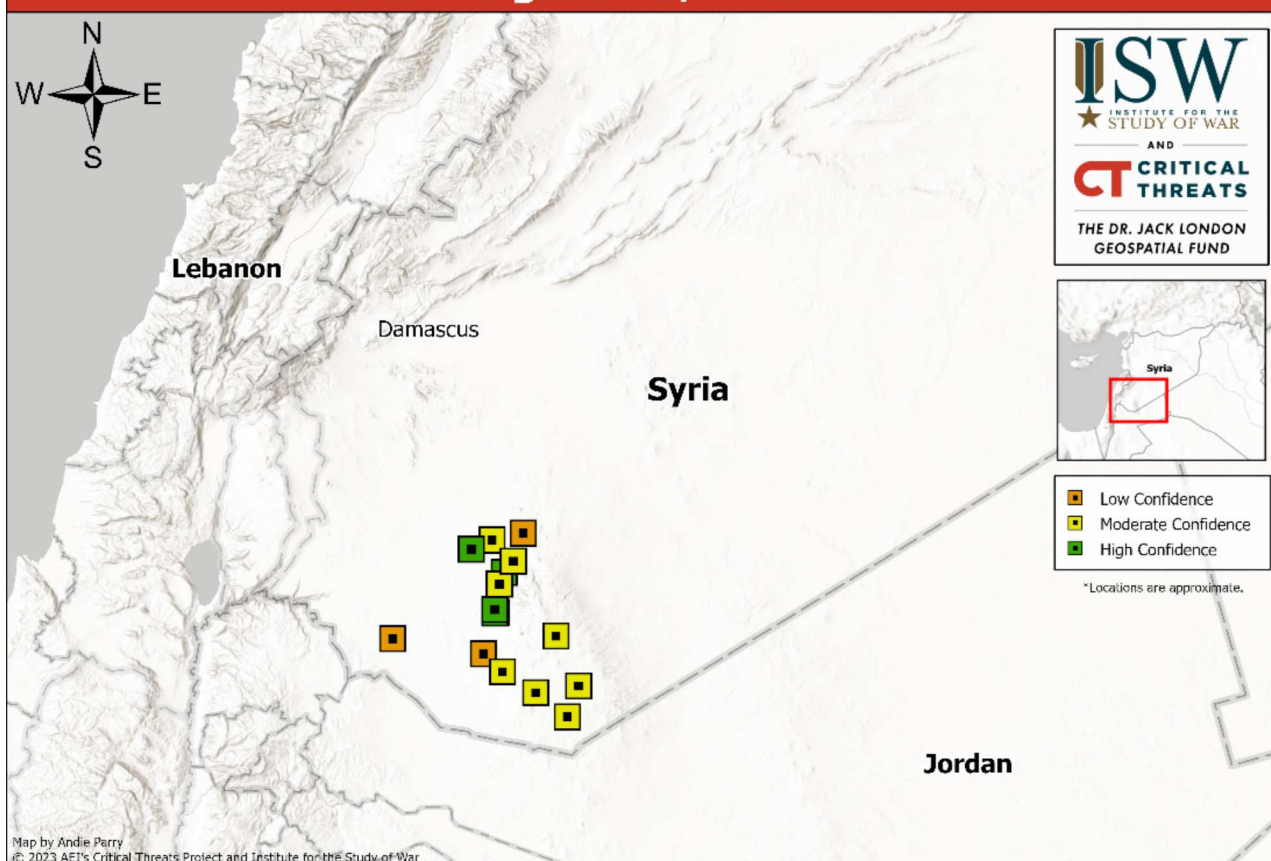


1. SUWAYDA - At least 16 anti-regime protests occurred in the southern Syrian provinces of Suwayda and Daraa on August 23. The protests have gained popular support and activists are circulating calls for protests in Deir ez Zor Province on Thursday August 24, and in all Syrian provinces on Friday August 25.
2. MAYADIN - Armed groups assassinated four pro-regime personnel, two personnel from Iranian-backed groups, in eastern Syria between August 10 and August 22. Syrian regime forces refused to complete patrols in Mayadin city on August 23 following the assassinations.
3. RAMALLAH - The Supreme Leader's office showcased the Iranian regime's sponsorship of Palestinian resistance groups on August 22 after Israeli officials blamed Iran for kinetic activity in the West Bank.
4. MOSCOW - Artesh Ground Forces Commander Brigadier General Kiomars Heydari traveled to Moscow between August 20-23. Heydari's visit to the border surveillance equipment center and comment about "terrorism" indicate that Iran seeks Russian assistance in enhancing its border security.

Anti-Regime Protests in Syria

At least 16 anti-regime protests occurred in the southern Syrian provinces of Suwayda and Daraa on August 23.[1] Local media reported higher numbers—around 30 protests—but ISW could only verify 16.[2] The total number of protest locations declined from August 22 as more than 700 protesters in delegations from small towns converged in Suwayda City on August 23. [3] The delegations and participation from Druze religious leaders indicate the growing organization of the protest movement.[4]

Protest Activity in Syria as of August 23, 4:00 PM ET



The protests have gained popular support and activists are circulating calls for protests in Deir ez Zor Province on Thursday, August 24, and in all Syrian provinces on Friday, August 25.[5] Anti-regime protests began on August 16 after Syrian President Bashar al Assad adjusted bus prices and cut fuel subsidies.[6] Suwayda locals burned photos of Assad, closed government offices, and led chants urging the overthrow of the regime.[7] Syrians in other provinces have expressed solidarity with the demonstrators, as have activists in Syrian Democratic Forces-, Turkish-, and rebel-controlled territories.[8] Unidentified people wrote anti-regime phrases on buildings in Deir ez Zor City on August 23, which prompted regime forces to deploy to the area.[9] ISW previously reported that the regime is trying to prevent the protests from spreading to additional provinces, including by patrolling in Deir ez Zor City.[10]

The Syrian regime's efforts to address the protesters demands are unlikely to quell the protests. Syrian regime forces used a reserve stock of wheat in Deir ez Zor Province to appeal to protesters in other provinces.[11] The forces transported dozens of trucks loaded with wheat on August 23 from Deir ez Zor Province towards mills in Homs to convert into flour and then distribute to protesters.[12] These steps do not meet the demands of protesters and are not long-term solutions to deteriorating living conditions. Protesters spread a slogan across the internet "Revolution of dignity, not revolution of hunger." [13] Anti-Syrian regime outlet *Eye of Euphrates* estimates the regime has transferred 80 percent of Deir ez Zor wheat rations to other regions.[14] The rising cost of living has driven discontent in eastern Syria, which suggests that the loss of wheat rations will further aggravate people.

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Syrian regime forces are failing to protect pro-regime forces from armed militant groups. Armed groups assassinated four pro-regime personnel, two of whom were from Iranian-backed militias, in eastern Syria between August 10 and August 22.[15] Syrian regime forces refused to complete patrols in Mayadin City on August 23 following the assassinations of Iranian-backed militias and regime forces.[16] The regime's failure to secure urban areas is emblematic of poor morale and discipline.[17]

- A militia called the Burkan al Furat Brigade also claimed to kill a Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) officer with a roadside bomb eastern Syria on August 22.[18] CTP previously reported that Burkan al Furat Brigade has claimed multiple attacks on Iranian-backed militias in eastern Syria, including killing an Iranian-backed Iraqi commander outside of Deir ez Zor City on August 10.[19]
- No group has claimed responsibility for the other two assassinations.

Iranian-backed militias installed dozens of surveillance cameras in Mayadin City on August 21 because of the assassinations.[20] Iran maintains critical military infrastructure throughout eastern Syria, including weapons storage facilities, training camps, and houses for forces.[21] Iran also relies on senior commanders and officers from the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Quds Force and LH to direct Iranian-backed militias in carrying out operational goals, such as arms smuggling or directing attacks.[22]

The Supreme Leader's office showcased the Iranian regime's sponsorship of Palestinian resistance groups on August 22 after Israeli officials blamed Iran for kinetic activity in the West Bank. Supreme Leader Foreign Policy Adviser Ali Akbar Velayati held separate telephone calls with Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) Secretary General Ziyad al Nakhalah and Hamas Political Bureau Head Ismail Haniyeh on August 22.[23] Velayati praised both groups for their recent operations against Israel. The phone calls follow Israeli officials blaming Iran for two terrorist attacks on August 19 and 21 in the West Bank.[24] Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu further claimed on August 21 that Iran is financing and directing the general uptick in kinetic activity in the West Bank in recent months.[25] Hamas claimed responsibility for the two recent attacks on August 22.[26]

Senior regime officials, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, have called for further arming resistance groups in the West Bank since August 2022.[27] These calls have coincided with an uptick in kinetic activity in the West Bank during the past year, as CTP previously reported.[28] Khamenei emphasized the need to strengthen West Bank resistance groups during his meeting with Nakhalah on June 14 and Haniyeh on June 21, further claiming that Israel was attempting to create "divisions and differences" among Palestinian resistance groups.[29] President Ebrahim Raisi and Supreme National Security Council Secretary Rear Admiral Ali Akbar Ahmadian echoed Khamenei's call for expanding operations in the West Bank in separate meetings with Nakhalah and Haniyeh on June 17 and 19.[30] IRGC Commander Major General Hossein Salami previously specified during an interview with the Supreme Leader's website in August 2022 that Iran seeks to arm Palestinian groups' "infantry" in the West Bank to conduct more ground operations against Israeli security forces and stoke unrest.[31]

Palestinian militants thanked Iran and the broader Axis of Resistance on July 5 for their help during the Israel Defense Forces raid on Palestinian militant sites in Jenin, West Bank between July 3 and 5.[32] IRGC-affiliated media subsequently touted the successes of Iran-sponsored armed resistance in the West Bank against the Israeli raids into the area.[33]

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.

Artesh Ground Forces Commander Brigadier General Kiomars Heydari traveled to Moscow between August 20-23. Heydari met with Russian Ground Forces Commander General Oleg Salyukov and Russian Deputy Defense Minister Alexander Fomin.[34] Heydari and Salyukov

discussed improving combat readiness and agreed to increase military cooperation on August 21, as CTP previously reported.[35] Heydari also visited Russia's border surveillance equipment center and defense equipment production center.[36] Heydari stated on August 23 that Iran will continue to deepen its cooperation with Russia to combat "terrorism."

Heydari's visit to the border surveillance equipment center and comment about "terrorism" indicate that Iran seeks Russian assistance in enhancing its border security. Iran has insecure borders with Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, the Iraqi Kurdistan Region, and Pakistan, which have previously presented threats to the regime. Iranian media accused Kurdish opposition groups of helping Israel smuggle military equipment into Iran that Israel used in its January 2023 drone attack on a munitions factory in Esfahan City, Esfahan Province, for example.[37] The regime most recently blamed the August 13 Shah Cheragh Shrine attack in Shiraz, Fars Province, on foreign nationals who illegally entered Iran via its eastern border.[38] Iranian media criticized the Afghan Taliban's failure to ensure border security on August 15, the second anniversary of the Taliban's takeover of Kabul, moreover.[39]

Heydari's visit to the defense equipment production center indicates that the Artesh Ground Forces are looking to Russia to fulfill some of its defense equipment needs. Procuring Russian equipment for the Artesh Ground Forces or securing Russian assistance to produce the equipment in Iran would expand the military support the Kremlin already provides to the Iranian regime. Russia is assisting Iran with the development of space launch vehicles and missiles and Iran has sought to purchase Su-35 fighter aircraft from Russia, for example.[40]

Iran Update, August 24, 2023

Iran Update, August 24, 2023

Andie Parry, Annika Ganzeveld, and Nicholas Carl

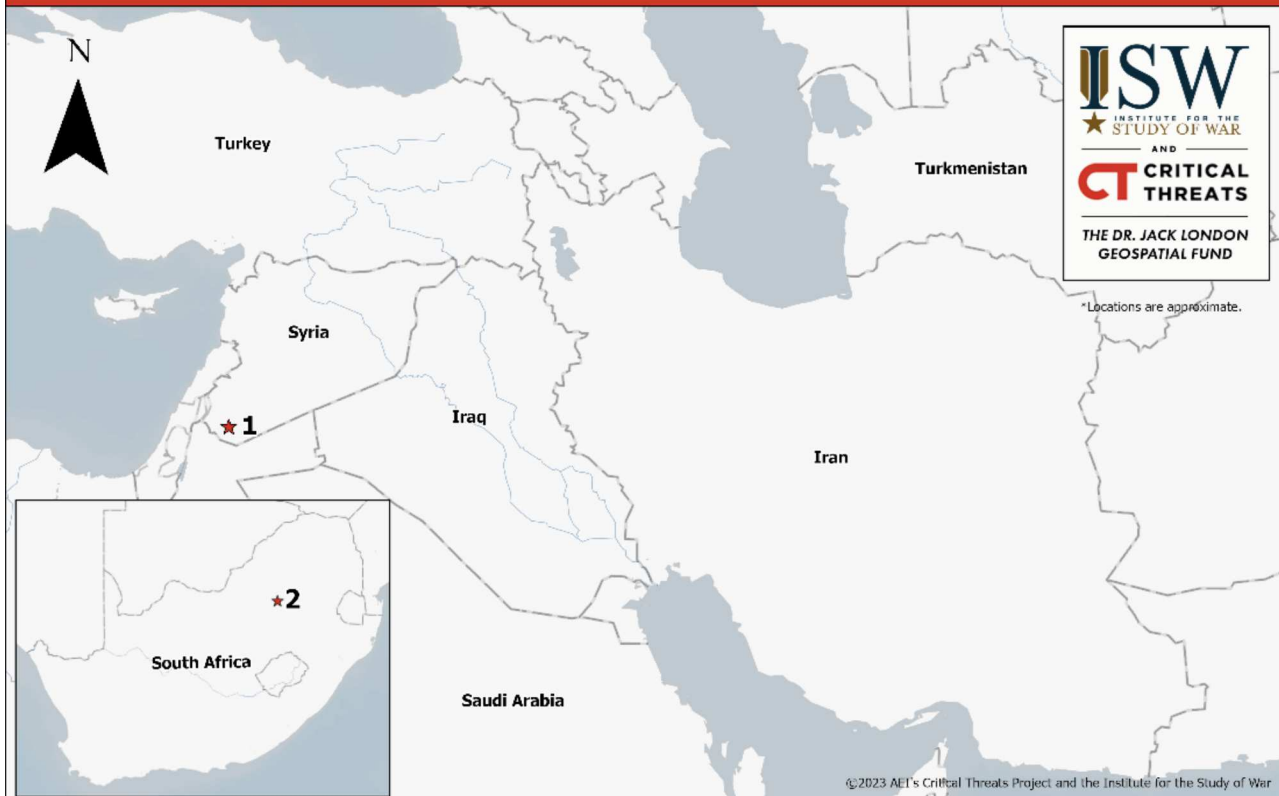
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Key Takeaways

1. Anti-regime protests continued and expanded to additional provinces in Syria. The expansion of protests to Deir ez Zor Province, albeit limited, suggests that Syrian protest groups may have successfully planned and organized the demonstrations.
2. BRICS invited Iran to become a full member state. Iranian state media boasted that membership will help the regime undermine Western sanctions and support major infrastructure projects.

Iran Update | August 24, 2023



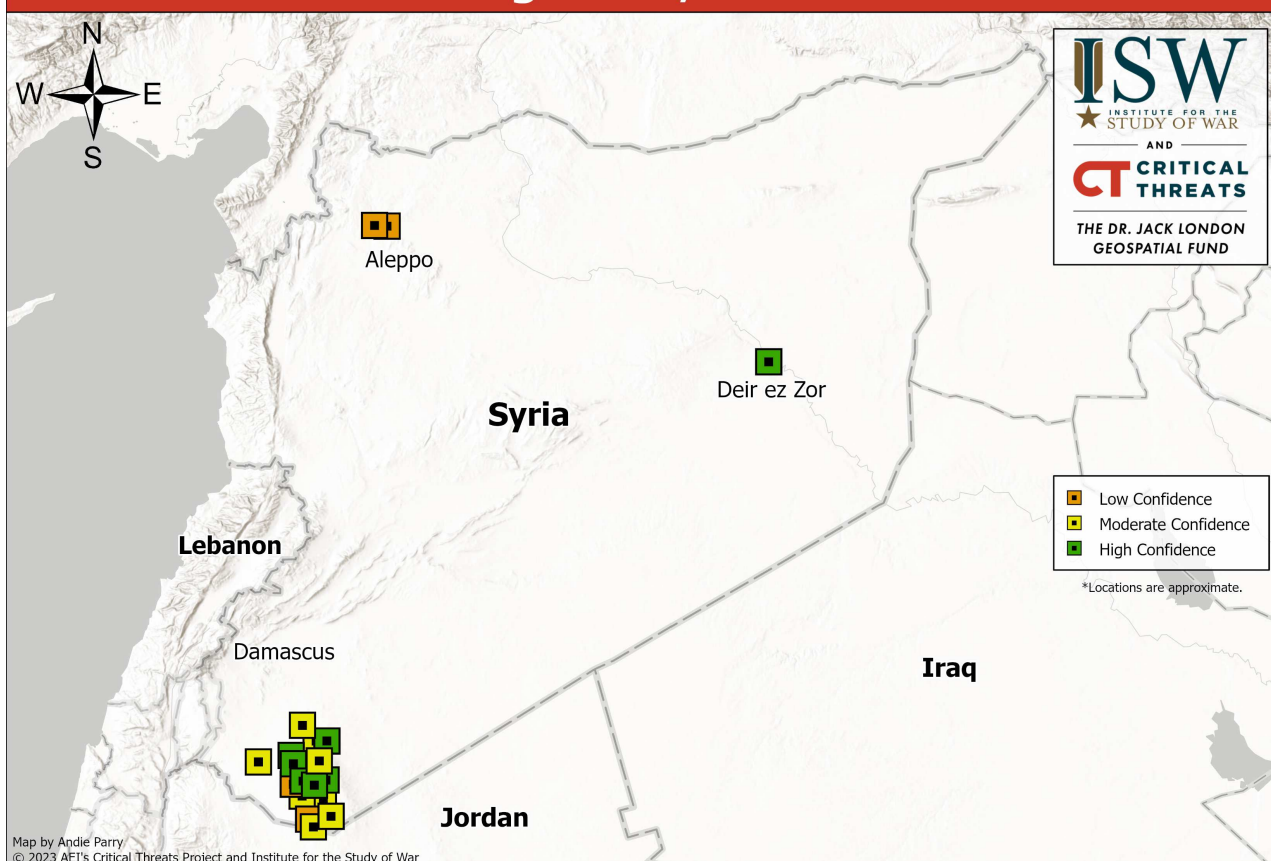
1. SUWAYDA - Anti-regime protests continued and expanded to additional provinces in Syria. The expansion of protests to Deir ez Zor Province, albeit limited, suggests that Syrian protest groups may have successfully planned and organized the demonstrations.

2. JOHANNESBURG - BRICS invited Iran to become a full member state. Iranian state media boasted that membership will help the regime undermine Western sanctions and support major infrastructure projects.

Anti-Regime Protests in Syria

Anti-regime protests continued and expanded to additional provinces in Syria on August 24. At least 18 protests occurred in Suwayda Province, where the current protest wave began on August 16.[1] Two protests occurred in Aleppo Province, and one protest occurred in Deir ez Zor Province.[2] ISW has not previously recorded protests in Aleppo and Deir ez Zor during this protest wave. Arab Bedouin groups and women participated in the demonstration in Suwayda City, indicating that the protests have grown to include additional demographics.[3]

Protest Activity in Syria as of August 24, 4:00 PM ET



The expansion of protests to Deir ez Zor Province, albeit limited, suggests that Syrian protest groups may have successfully planned and organized the demonstrations. ISW previously reported calls for protests in Deir ez Zor Province on August 24.[4] The protests were explicitly anti-regime but small in scale. Syrian regime forces reportedly arrested seven protesters and closed public transportation.[5] Opposition activists reported pro-regime militias used live fire to suppress protests and arrested demonstrators in Aleppo.[6] ISW cannot independently verify these claims.

Protest activists disseminated calls for mass protests throughout Syria on August 25.[7] ISW will continue to monitor and report on this protest activity in Syria.

Iranian Domestic and Political Affairs

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

BRICS invited Iran to become a full member state on August 24.[8] BRICS made the announcement at its 15th annual summit in South Africa, which Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi attended.[9] BRICS also extended membership invitations to Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. Raisi met several world leaders on the sidelines of the summit, including Chinese President Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.[10] Iran's full membership in BRICS is slated to begin in January 2024.[11] Iran's admission into this multilateral economic bloc follows extensive efforts by the Raisi administration to convince BRICS countries to grant Iran membership.[12]

Iranian state media boasted that BRICS will help the regime mitigate and undermine Western sanctions. Iranian state media reported on August 24 that one of the biggest advantages Iran will gain through its newfound membership in BRICS is access to the New Development Bank.[13] The New Development Bank has its own payment notification system, which can act as

an alternative to SWIFT. CTP previously reported that Iran has sought an alternative financial messaging system to Belgium-based SWIFT ever since SWIFT disconnected Iran from its platform in 2018.[14] Iranian media additionally emphasized that BRICS members support de-dollarization. The reports noted that BRICS countries conduct economic exchanges in local currencies and have discussed creating a common currency.[15] Iran seeks to trade using local currencies to preserve its dwindling foreign currency reserves. Iran can lastly expand its economic cooperation with current and new BRICS members. Iranian media emphasized that Iran can economically benefit from BRICS because its current members—Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa—account for a quarter of the world’s GDP.[16]

Iran will likely use its membership in BRICS to try to accelerate the completion of regional infrastructure projects. Raisi administration-affiliated media reported on August 24 that Iran’s membership will help Iran “activate” the Russia-Iran-India corridor and China’s Belt and Road Initiative.[17] Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi emphasized Iran’s important role in the Belt and Road Initiative during a phone call about BRICS with Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian on August 20.[18] The completion of these projects would bolster Iran’s economy and help Iran become a regional and international “transit hub.”[19] Iran has repeatedly sought Russian and Chinese assistance and financing to complete infrastructure projects. Russia agreed to partially finance Iranian construction of the Rasht-Astara railway--a missing link in the International North South Transit Corridor--in May 2023.[20] An Iranian transportation official additionally announced in July 2023 that Iran is conducting preliminary negotiations involving China constructing roads connecting Tehran to the Caspian Sea in exchange for Iranian oil.[21]

Iran’s admission into BRICS is part of its broader efforts to establish a parallel international order that challenges Western “dominance.”[22] Raisi stressed that the expansion of BRICS underscores the decline of “unilateralism” during a meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping on August 24.[23] State media additionally recirculated Russian President Vladimir Putin’s remark at the summit that most of the world is tired of the West’s “pressure and deception.”[24] The South African government previously expressed concerns that Iran intends to transform BRICS into an “anti-western bloc,” as CTP previously reported.[25]

Iranian officials and media are framing Iran’s accession into BRICS as a foreign policy victory. Vice President for Political Affairs Mohammad Jamshidi described Iran’s membership as a “strategic victory.”[26] Iranian media additionally boasted that Iran was chosen from more than 30 countries to join the organization.[27] Iran’s admission into BRICS is consistent with the Raisi administration’s “neighborhood policy,” which is an economic policy centered on building relations with regional and extra-regional states to undermine Western sanctions.[28] Iran became a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in July 2023 and seeks greater cooperation with the Eurasian Economic Union.[29] Iran’s admission into BRICS also follows several Iranian fiscal victories in recent weeks. Iran and the United States reached a deal for the United States to release \$6 billion worth of frozen Iranian assets in return for Iran releasing five detained US nationals.[30] Iranian oil exports have additionally nearly reached pre-sanctions levels in August.[31] The prisoner swap agreement and increased oil exports could boost Iran’s economy and help Iran implement its 2023 budget, as CTP previously asserted.[32]