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IRAN UPDATE, AUGUST 25, 2023

Iran Update, August 25, 2023

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

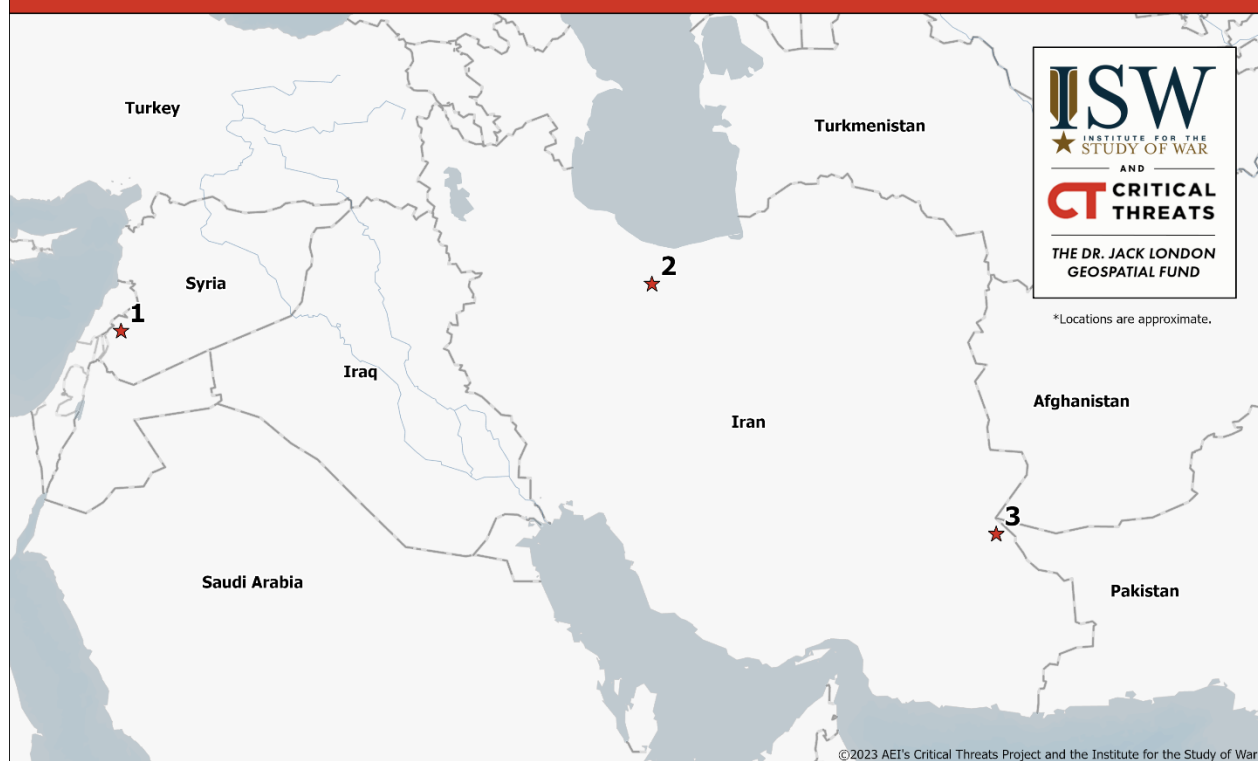
The Iran Update aims to inform national security policy by providing timely, relevant, and independent open-source analysis of developments pertaining to Iran and its Axis of Resistance. This update covers political, military, and economic events and trends that affect the stability and decision-making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

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

Key Takeaways

1. Syrian opposition media reported that the Bashar al Assad regime ordered all Syrian Arab Army officers and troops to refrain from taking leave until further notice.
2. The Iranian regime is continuing to take preemptive measures to deter and prevent protests ahead of the one-year anniversary of Mahsa Amini's killing on September 16.
3. Anti-regime protests occurred in at least three cities in Sistan and Baluchistan Province—a slight uptick from the usual protest activity that occurs each Friday in the province.

Iran Update | August 25, 2023



- 1). DAMASCUS - Syrian opposition media reported that the Bashar al Assad regime ordered all Syrian Arab Army officers and troops to refrain from taking leave until further notice.
- 2). TEHRAN - The Iranian regime is continuing to take preemptive measures to deter and prevent protests ahead of the one-year anniversary of Mahsa Amini's killing on September 16.
- 3). ZAHEDAN - Anti-regime protests occurred in at least three cities in Sistan and Baluchistan Province—a slight uptick from the usual protest activity that occurs each Friday in the province.

Iranian Activities in the Levant

This section covers Iranian efforts to consolidate and expand Tehran's economic, military, and political influence throughout the Levant, 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 opposition media reported that the Bashar al Assad regime ordered all Syrian Arab Army (SAA) officers and troops to refrain from taking leave until further notice.[1] The opposition reports did not specify how sweeping this directive is, and ISW cannot corroborate the claim. The Syrian Defense Ministry appeared to deny the claim, stating that internet sources are “trying to sow chaos and affect the morale of our valiant army and our proud people by spreading false news and misinformation related to our armed forces.”[2] ISW previously reported that Syrian regime forces are failing to protect pro-regime forces from militant attacks in eastern Syria and that the regime's failure to secure urban areas is emblematic of poor morale and discipline.[3] A local journalist in Deir ez Zor furthermore reported that the rate of desertions from regime forces has increased dramatically in August 2023.[4] The Syrian regime brought a large reinforcement to eastern Syria from Homs Province, deploying these reinforcements alongside Iranian-backed militias, on August 24, suggesting that the regime is attempting to address security threats there.[5] Iran maintains a sizeable force in eastern Syria and benefits from the

regime forces securing military positions and pro-regime forces from threats, such as armed opposition groups.

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 continuing to conduct preemptive measures to counter protests ahead of the one-year anniversary of Mahsa Amini's killing on September 16. Iranian officials have expressed concern about the resumption of anti-regime protests and are thus trying to deter and prevent anti-regime activity.[6]

- The Intelligence and Security Ministry is arresting protest activists and pressuring known protesters to commit to abstaining from future demonstrations, according to Western and Iranian diaspora outlets.[7] This reporting follows the ministry arresting twelve women's rights activists, who participated in the Mahsa Amini movement, on August 17.[8] The ministry accused them of planning to "incite chaos and vandalism."
- Social media reports have furthermore indicated that regime security forces deployed helicopters to Boukan and Mahabad, West Azerbaijan Province on August 24.[9] These claims follow social media reports that security forces deployed to Boukan on August 18.[10] This security activity around northwestern Iran is unsurprising given how the Mahsa Amini movement concentrated heavily in this area.

Anti-regime protests occurred in at least three cities in Sistan and Baluchistan Province on August 24—a slight uptick from the usual protest activity that occurs each Friday in the province. Residents in Khash, Rask, and Zahedan demonstrated against the arrest of Moulana Abdol Ghaffar Naghshbandi—the Sunni Friday prayer leader for Rask and an outspoken regime critic.[11] The regime likely arrested Naghshbandi in March 2023 but did not announce the arrest until August 20. The regime accused Naghshbandi of inciting riots and of taking "provocative" positions in his sermons.[12] His office previously called for mass protests in response to regime protest suppression in Zahedan in February 2023, as CTP reported at the time.[13] Zahedan residents have protested every Friday since September 30, 2022, when security forces violently suppressed protesters in an event that became known as "Bloody Friday." [14] CTP has contrastingly not recorded protests in Khash and Rask since June 2023.

The regime may have announced Naghshbandi's arrest on August 20 to warn prominent Sunni cleric Moulana Abdol Hamid to refrain from stoking protests. Abdol Hamid's fiery sermons have sparked anti-regime protests every Friday in Zahedan since September 2022. The regime has, moreover, continued to ignore the grievances of the Iranian Baloch protesters in Sistan and Baluchistan Province. As noted above, Iranian authorities are taking various measures to deter anti-regime protest activity ahead of the one-year anniversaries of Mahsa Amini's death and the Bloody Friday incident on September 16 and 30, respectively.

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IRAN UPDATE, AUGUST 28, 2023

Iran Update, August 28, 2023

Ashka Jhaveri and Amin Soltani

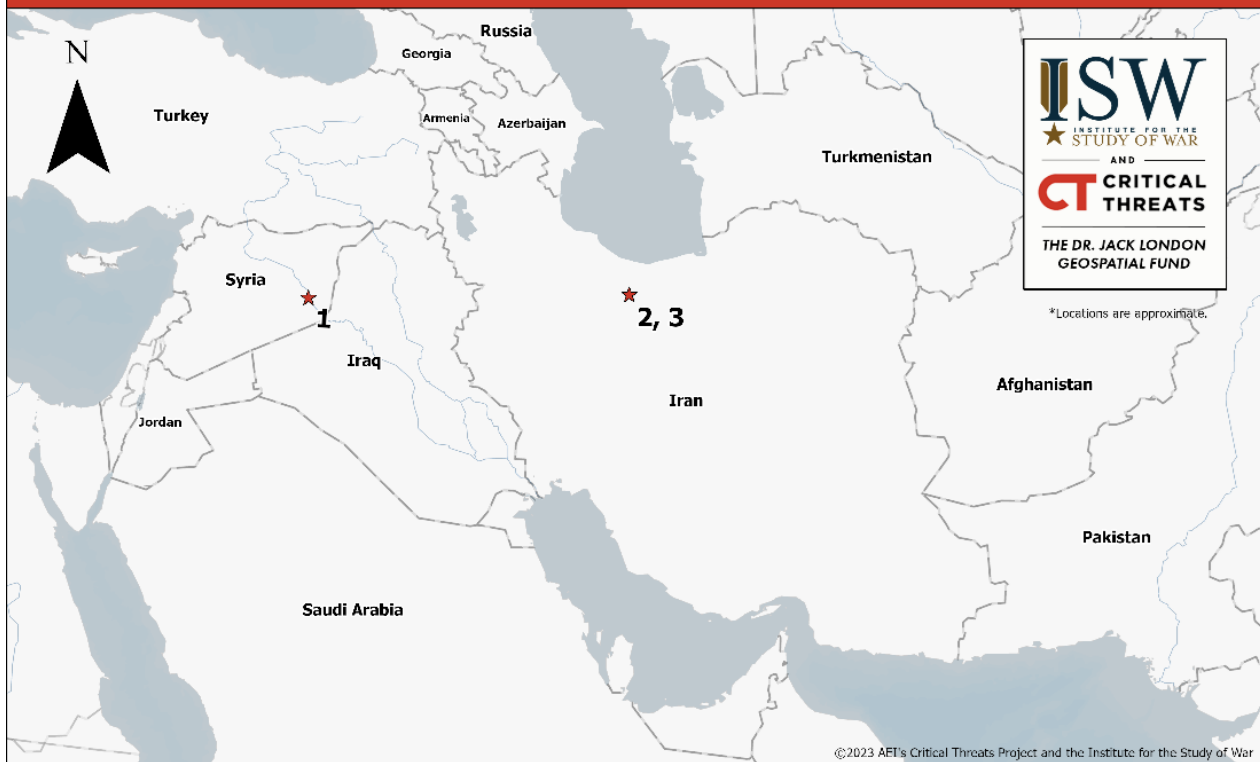
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Key Takeaways

1. Iranian-backed militants deployed to Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)-controlled territory to conduct sabotage attacks amidst clashes between two US-backed groups in eastern Syria. The deployment of Iranian-backed militants likely supports pro-regime campaign objectives to expel the United States from Syria.
2. Iran threatened to take action against Kurdish anti-regime groups in Iraq and may conduct attacks in Iraq in the next month.
3. Iran finalized a barter agreement with China wherein Iran provides oil in exchange for Chinese development of the Imam Khomeini Airport in Tehran. This is consistent with the overall trend of Sino-Iranian oil-for-infrastructure agreements.

Iran Update | August 28, 2023



- 1). MAYADIN - Iranian-backed militants deployed to Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)-controlled territory to conduct sabotage attacks amidst clashes between two US-backed groups in eastern Syria. The deployment of Iranian-backed militants likely supports pro-regime campaign objectives to expel the United States from Syria.
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Iranian Activities in the Levant

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

Iranian-backed militants deployed to Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)-controlled territory to conduct sabotage attacks amidst clashes between two US-backed groups in eastern Syria. The US-backed SDF has been clashing with its primary subordinate military force in Deir ez Zor Province, the Deir ez Zor Military Council (DMC), since August 27.[1] The clashes began after the SDF arrested the DMC commander, who attempted to create a tribal alliance outside the SDF.[2] The SDF and DMC are fighting across Deir ez Zor Province, cutting off roads, arresting leaders, and besieging each other's headquarters.[3] The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds force tasked 25 Iraqi militants operating in Syria on August 28 to conduct sabotage acts and take advantage of the unrest in the region, according to local opposition media.[4] The Iraqi militants are part of the Abu Al Fadl Al Abbas militia and crossed into SDF-territory using an Iranian-controlled

river crossing in Mayadin.[5] The clashes between the SDF and DMC are ongoing as of August 28, and CTP will continue to monitor potential Iranian involvement and implications for US forces.

The deployment of Iranian-backed militants likely supports pro-regime campaign objectives to expel the United States from Syria. The IRGC Quds Force has recruited Syrians to establish “sleepers cells” in SDF territory to monitor US positions, plant explosive devices, and spread clan strife in the SDF region.[6] Iranian-backed militias have laid the logistical groundwork to operate and conduct attacks on US forces from regime-held territory and from within the SDF’s territory.[7] These Iranian-directed actions are consistent with CTP’s tracking of an Iranian, Russian, and Syrian coordinated campaign to expel US forces from Syria.[8] Iran, with support from Syria and Russia, has established the conditions to create an environment in eastern Syria that is hostile to the US forces. CTP previously warned that this environment has the potential to draw the United States into conflict in the near term.[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.

Iran threatened to take action against Kurdish anti-regime groups in Iraq and may conduct attacks in Iraq in the next month. Foreign Affairs Ministry spokesperson Nasser Kanani threatened on August 28 that Iran will act to ensure its security if the Iraqi government fails to disarm and relocate militant groups inside Iraqi Kurdistan by September 19.[10] This is not the first time that Iranian officials have sought to address perceived threats from Iraqi Kurdistan this year. Armed Forces General Staff Chief Major General Mohammed Bagheri warned that Iran would resume kinetic operations in Iraqi Kurdistan if it failed to disarm “separatist groups” in this region.[11] Iran and Iraq signed a security agreement on March 19 wherein the Iraqi government agreed to curtail the presence of militant groups inside Iraqi Kurdistan.[12] Iran also has conducted attacks into Iraq to address threats from Kurdish anti-regime groups previously. IRGC ground forces conducted artillery attacks on Kurdish militants in Sarvabad, Kurdistan Province as recently as June 15 to 16.[13] IRGC ground forces similarly conducted artillery, missile, and drone attacks on Kurdish militants in Iraqi Kurdistan in March, September, October, and November 2022.[14] Iran does not always follow through with its threats to conduct attacks into Iraqi Kurdistan, however.

Regime officials have also repeatedly accused these anti-regime militants and Israel of using Iraqi Kurdistan to facilitate operations into Iran.[15] For example, Iranian media accused Kurdish opposition groups of helping Israel smuggle military equipment into Iran that Israel used in its January 28 drone attack on a munitions factory in Esfahan.[16] Iran also accused anti-regime militant groups inside Iraqi Kurdistan of supporting protesters during the 2022 Mahsa Amini movement.[17] The IRGC conducted attacks using artillery, missiles, and drones on the groups in September, October, and November 2022 as a result.[18] Iranian officials have recently expressed concern about the resumption of anti-regime protests in recent weeks and are trying to deter anti-regime activity.[19]

Iran finalized a barter agreement with China wherein Iran provides oil in exchange for Chinese development of the Imam Khomeini Airport in Tehran. This is consistent with the overall trend of Sino-Iranian oil-for-infrastructure agreements. Imam Khomeini Airport Company CEO Saeed Chalandari stated on August 27 that China will financially support the expansion of the airport.[20] Roads and Urban Development Ministry officials stated that the Iran will have to supply two and a half to three billion euros worth of Iranian oil in exchange.[21] Freeway Executive Affairs Office Director General Mahmoud Melazinel stated on July 8 that Iran was conducting preliminary negotiations with China to construct the Tehran-North freeway in exchange for Iranian oil.[22] The Tehran-North freeway is an incomplete infrastructure project aimed at expanding the roads connecting Tehran to the Caspian Sea.

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IRAN UPDATE, AUGUST 29, 2023

Iran Update, August 29, 2023

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

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Key Takeaways

1. Lebanese Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah blamed the United States for the ongoing protests in Syria and called on demonstrators to show leniency toward the Bashar al Assad regime. Nasrallah is the first Axis of Resistance leader to publicly acknowledge the protests.
2. Iranian-backed militants raised their readiness levels around Deir ez Zor City amid ongoing clashes between the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces and the Deir ez Zor Military Council in eastern Syria.
3. IRGC Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani suggested that Iran would take unspecified military action if the Iraqi central government does not disarm and relocate anti-Iranian regime Kurdish militias in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Iran Update | August 29, 2023



- 1). BEIRUT - Lebanese Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah blamed the United States for the ongoing protests in Syria and called on demonstrators to show leniency toward the Bashar al Assad regime. Nasrallah is the first Axis of Resistance leader to publicly acknowledge the protests.
- 2). DEIR EZ ZOR - Iranian-backed militants raised their readiness levels around Deir ez Zor City amid ongoing clashes between the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces and the Deir ez Zor Military Council in eastern Syria.
- 3). BAGHDAD - IRGC Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani suggested that Iran would take unspecified military action if the Iraqi central government does not disarm and relocate anti-Iranian regime Kurdish militias in Iraqi Kurdistan.

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Lebanese Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah blamed the United States for the ongoing protest movement in Syria and called on Syrian demonstrators to show leniency toward the Bashar al Assad regime.[1] Protests have spread throughout Syria, primarily in the south of the country, since August 16 in response to worsening economic conditions and poor governance by the regime. Nasrallah appealed to Syrians to be cooperative and patient with the Syrian regime. He made these remarks during a speech on August 28. Nasrallah is the first Axis of Resistance leader to publicly acknowledge the economic crisis and protests in Syria. The fact that Nasrallah felt the need to address these crises underscores their severity. Nasrallah's blame of the United States mirrors pro-Syrian regime messaging about the crises in Syria.[2]

Iranian-backed militias raised their readiness levels around Deir ez Zor City amid ongoing clashes between the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Deir ez Zor Military Council (DMC) in eastern Syria. The SDF has been clashing with its primary subordinate military force in Deir ez Zor Province, the DMC, since August 27. Local tribes within the DMC declared full control of six villages within five kilometers of regime-controlled territory on August 29 following SDF withdrawals.[3] Pro-regime forces, such as Lebanese Hezbollah and the National Defense Forces, raised the readiness of their forces on August 28 and 29 in the Deir ez Zor area for unspecified reasons.[4] The militias have also reinforced most checkpoints along the Euphrates River, which splits SDF and regime-controlled territory since the clashes began.[5] Local opposition media claimed the forces were told to raise their readiness against the backdrop of tension between the SDF and DMC but did not specify to what end.[6] ISW previously reported that Iranian-backed militants deployed to SDF-controlled territory to conduct sabotage attacks to aid the clashes between the SDF and DMC, likely as part of the Iranian effort to expel the United States from Syria.[7]

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.

IRGC Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani suggested that Iran would take unspecified military action if the Iraqi central government did not disarm and relocate anti-Iranian regime Kurdish militias in Iraqi Kurdistan. Ghaani reportedly met with Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani on an unspecified date and told him that Iran would be forced to defend its national security if the Iraqi central government did not implement a security agreement that Iran and Iraq reached in March 2023.[8] The agreement involves the Iraqi central government disarming and relocating the Kurdish militias in exchange for Iran halting airstrikes into Iraqi Kurdistan and withdrawing troops from the border region, according to Qatari-owned, UK-based *Al Araby Al Jadeed*. CTP previously reported that Ghaani traveled to Baghdad on August 15.[9] Ghaani's comments are consistent with other recent regime threats toward the Kurdish militias in recent weeks. Armed Forces General Staff Major General Mohammad Bagheri and Foreign Affairs Ministry spokesperson Nasser Kanani warned that Iran would resume military operations into Iraqi Kurdistan on July 11 and August 28, respectively, if the Iraqi central government did not address Iranian security concerns.[10] Iran has repeatedly conducted drone, missile, and rocket attacks against Kurdish militias in Iraqi Kurdistan in recent years, especially during the Mahsa Amini protest movement in late 2022.[11] Regime officials have repeatedly accused these groups of using Iraqi Kurdistan to facilitate operations into Iran and stoke unrest, such as anti-regime protests, there.[12]

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IRAN UPDATE, AUGUST 30, 2023

Iran Update, August 30, 2023

Andie Parry, Amin Soltani, and Annika Ganzeveld

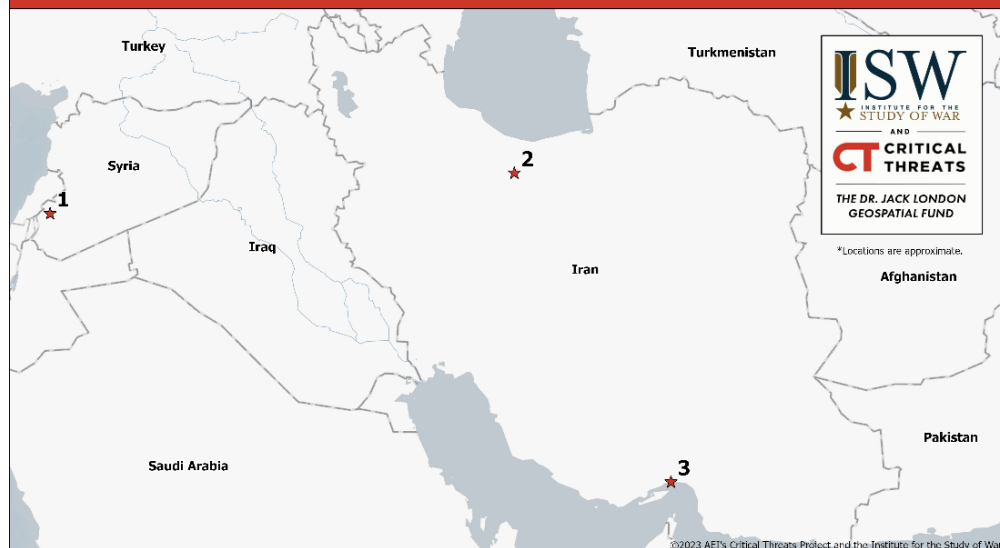
The Iran Update aims to inform national security policy by providing timely, relevant, and independent open-source analysis of developments pertaining to Iran and its Axis of Resistance. This update covers political, military, and economic events and trends that affect the stability and decision-making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

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Key Takeaways

1. The Iranian foreign minister traveled to Damascus, where he discussed economic cooperation and political stability with Syrian officials. The trip comes two weeks after the start of daily anti-regime demonstrations that protest the Assad regime raising fuel prices.
2. Iranian officials are signaling that the regime will pursue nuclear negotiations, probably with the aim to achieve a comprehensive agreement.
3. Russia has begun transporting consumer goods to Saudi Arabia via Iran. The transit of Russian goods to Saudi Arabia via Iran is consistent with Iran's efforts to become a regional and international "transit hub."

Iran Update | August 30, 2023



- 1). DAMASCUS - The Iranian foreign minister traveled to Damascus, where he discussed economic cooperation and political stability with Syrian officials. The trip comes two weeks after the start of daily anti-regime demonstrations that protest the Assad regime raising fuel prices.
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Iranian Activities in the Levant

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

Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian met with several Syrian officials in Damascus on August 30 to discuss economic cooperation and political stability. Abdollahian's conversation with Syrian Prime Minister Hussein Arnous focused on implementing the economic memorandums of understanding (MOUs) signed during Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi's visit to Syria in May 2023.[1] Syrian and Iranian political leaders last met to implement the MOUs in July 2023 in Tehran.[2] Abdollahian affirmed that Iran will continue to support Syria's leaders, military, and people until the country is stabilized and prosperous in a press conference with Syrian Foreign Affairs Minister Faisal Mikdad.[3] Abdollahian's visit to Damascus comes at a time of political, economic, and security disruption for the regime. Daily anti-regime protests have occurred since the Assad regime raised fuel prices on August 15.[4] Iranian media's framing of the visit suggests that Abdollahian addressed the internal unrest in his meetings. Iranian state media announced the visit by underlining the need to establish stability and tranquility in Syria.[5] It also reiterated Bashar al Assad's previous statement that Iran and Syria have maintained stable relations through severe political and security crises.

Iranian Domestic and Political Affairs

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

Iranian officials are signaling that the regime will pursue nuclear negotiations, probably with the aim to achieve a comprehensive agreement. Foreign Affairs Ministry spokesperson Nasser Kanani stated on August 28 that Iran's chief nuclear negotiator, Ali Bagheri Kani, will engage in negotiations to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on the sidelines of the upcoming UN General Assembly meeting starting on September 5.[6] President Ebrahim Raisi stated on August 29 that Iran is pushing to revive the JCPOA and lift sanctions.[7] Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei urged Raisi administration officials on August 30 to counter the impact of economic sanctions and expressed approval of sanctions-lifting nuclear

negotiations.[8] Khamenei has previously endorsed comprehensive nuclear negotiations ahead of UN General Assembly meetings where Iranian officials would be able to meet with Western leaders.[9] These signals follow Iran and the United States concluding an agreement to exchange prisoners for unfrozen Iranian assets on August 10.[10] The prisoner-asset exchange deal is reportedly part of a larger interim agreement that involves constraints on the Iranian nuclear program.[11] Iran previously finalized such an interim agreement in 2013 as a confidence-building measure to facilitate more comprehensive negotiations subsequently.[12]

Russia has begun transporting consumer goods to Saudi Arabia via Iran. A Russian cargo train en route to Saudi Arabia entered Iran from Turkmenistan on August 26 and arrived in Bandar Abbas, Hormozgan Province on the Persian Gulf on August 30.[13] Hormozgan Province Railway Administration head Ali Reza Nasiri Barazandeh stated on August 30 that the International North South Transit Corridor (INSTC)—the land route connecting Russia to the Persian Gulf via Iran—has “economic and strategic benefits.”[14] He added that Iran can increase customs revenues by facilitating trade between Russia and Saudi Arabia. A Russian cargo train en route to India similarly passed through Iran for the first time in July 2022.[15]

Iran and Russia have pursued the completion of the INSTC to undermine and mitigate the impact of Western sanctions. Russia agreed in May 2023 to finance the Iranian construction of the Rasht-Astara railway in Gilan Province, Iran—the missing link in the INSTC.[16] The completion of this corridor will grant Iran and Russia access to new markets and enable Iran to charge foreign countries transit fees. Iranian media previously reported that the INSTC will generate \$20 billion in annual revenue for Iran once it is completed.[17]

The transit of Russian goods to Saudi Arabia via Iran is consistent with Iran’s efforts to become a regional and international “transit hub.”[18] Ebrahim Raisi administration officials have repeatedly framed Iran’s centrality in Eurasia as an important asset to regional organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS. President Raisi emphasized Iran’s ability to connect land-locked Central Asian countries to open waters following Iran’s accession into the SCO in July 2023.[19] Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian separately emphasized Iran’s ability to connect China to Brazil and South Africa during the Raisi administration’s diplomatic campaign to convince BRICS members to admit Iran in August 2023.[20]

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IRAN UPDATE, AUGUST 31, 2023

Iran Update, August 31, 2023

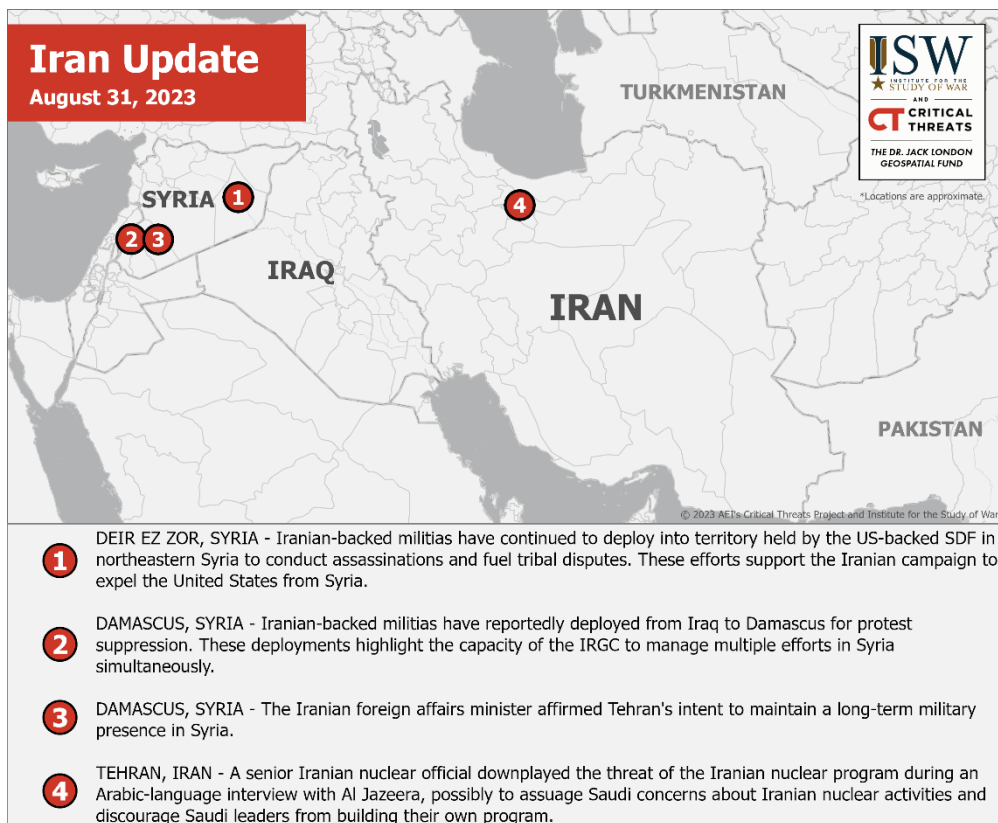
Ashka Jhaveri, Andie Parry, Amin Soltani, Annika Ganzeveld, and Nicholas Carl

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

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Key Takeaways

1. Iranian-backed militias have continued to deploy into territory held by the US-backed SDF in northeastern Syria to conduct assassinations and fuel tribal disputes. These efforts support the Iranian campaign to expel the United States from Syria.
2. Iranian-backed militias have reportedly deployed from Iraq to Damascus for protest suppression. These deployments highlight the capacity of the IRGC to manage multiple efforts in Syria simultaneously.
3. The Iranian foreign affairs minister affirmed Tehran's intent to maintain a long-term military presence in Syria.
4. A senior Iranian nuclear official downplayed the threat of the Iranian nuclear program during an Arabic-language interview with *Al Jazeera*, possibly to assuage Saudi concerns about Iranian nuclear activities and discourage Saudi leaders from building their own program.



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 groups, including Iranian-backed militias, have continued to deploy personnel into territory held by the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to conduct assassinations and fuel tribal disputes. These armed groups include the Baqir Brigade, National Defense Forces (NDF), and Syrian Air Force intelligence. The Baqir Brigade and Syrian Air Force intelligence have ties to the IRGC Quds Force. These deployments come as clashes have erupted between the SDF and its primary subordinate military force in Deir ez Zor Province—the Deir ez Zor Military Council (DMC)—since August 27. Iranian-backed efforts to stoke instability in SDF-held territory would undermine attempts by the US-led International Coalition to deescalate the situation.[1] These Iranian-backed efforts also support the Iranian campaign to expel the United States from Syria.

- Local Syrian opposition media reported on August 31 that the Baqir Brigade, NDF, and Syrian Air Force intelligence sent militants into SDF-held territory.[2] The Baqir Brigade sent militias into Kasra on August 31.[3] The Baqir Brigade leader called for escalation against the SDF and tribal support for the DMC.[4] The NDF and Syrian Air Force Intelligence sent militants to Dhiban.[5] The IRGC Quds Force previously tasked 25 Iraqi militants on August 28 with conducting sabotage and taking advantage of instability in SDF-held territory, as CTP previously reported.[6]
- The SDF arrested DMC commander Ahmed Abu Khawla on August 27 and began moving reinforcements into Deir ez Zor Province on the same day.[7] The arrest spurred major clashes between the SDF and DMC as well as local tribes. Both sides have suffered dozens of casualties in the fighting, making these clashes deadlier and more significant than the previous SDF-DMC fighting in July 2023.
- CTP and ISW have previously assessed that Iran is coordinating Russia and the Syrian regime to coerce the United States to withdraw forces from Syria.[8] The Iranian-backed militant deployments into SDF-held territory support this campaign by creating an increasingly hostile operating environment for US forces.

Iranian-backed militias have deployed from Iraq to Damascus for protest suppression, according to Syrian opposition media. Anti-Syrian regime protests have erupted in Syria since mid-August 2023 in response to the increasingly dire state of the economy and poor regime governance. The Iranian-backed militias sent to Damascus may be preparing to crackdown on the mass protests planned for September 1. The reported details on the militias, including that they are equipped with sniper rifles, is consistent with how the Iranian regime use their own security services to suppress internal unrest.

- Iranian-backed militias sent three buses of militants from Iraq to Damascus between August 27 and 31.[9] The militants had training on sniper rifles and urban warfare and were comprised of Iranians, Iraqis, and Afghans. The buses contained Shia pilgrims as well, which is consistent with CTP's previous reporting that Iranian-backed militias disguise themselves as pilgrims.[10]
- The ongoing anti-regime protests in Syria have centered in Suwayda Province, which is southeast of Damascus, but also are occurring in Aleppo, Daraa, Deir ez Zor, Idlib, Raqqa, and Rif Dimashq provinces.[11] Disaffected Syrians in all provinces have shown support for the movement on social media and in limited acts of civil disobedience.[12] Protests have paralyzed economic, political, and social life in southern Syria by blocking roads, closing businesses and government offices, and disrupting countrywide exams.[13]
- Protesters have called for mass demonstrations in all Syrian cities on September 1. Thousands of protesters gathered during the previous Friday's mass demonstrations.[14] A local activist in Suwayda Province told local media that the upcoming demonstrations "will probably be the most intense in terms of participation." [15]
- The Iranian regime has a long history of using violence to impose social control domestically. Iranian state security services have extensive training in urban warfare and using sniper rifles.[16] These services have used snipers against protesters in most major protest waves in Iran in recent years.[17] The deployment of Iranian-backed militias from Iraq to Damascus highlights the capacity of the IRGC to manage multiple efforts in Syria simultaneously. As reported above, Iran is coordinating with Russia and the Assad regime to expel the United States from Syria. This campaign involved Iran surging forces and materiel to the line of contact with the SDF in July 2023.[18] The fact that Iran sent militants from Iraq to Damascus highlights how Iran brought additional resources into Syria rather than drawing down its force presence around the line of contact with the SDF. Doing so allows Iran to continue to pressure the United States and SDF while also preparing for a possible protest crackdown around Damascus.

Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian affirmed Iranian leaders' intent to maintain a long-term military presence in Syria during a meeting with Syrian President Bashar al Assad in Damascus on August 31. Abdollahian stated that Iran will continue to help the Syrian regime combat terrorism.[19] Abdollahian previously emphasized that Iran seeks to maintain Syrian sovereignty and territorial integrity on August 30.[20] CTP and ISW have extensively reported in recent months on Tehran's continued efforts to entrench its military influence in Syria.[21] The Arab League issued a statement in May 2023 rejecting external support for non-state militias.[22]

Iranian Domestic and Political Affairs

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

A senior Iranian nuclear official downplayed the threat of the Iranian nuclear program during an Arabic-language interview with Al Jazeera on August 31.[23] This interview may have been meant to assuage Saudi concerns about Iranian nuclear activities and discourage Saudi leaders from building their own program. Atomic Energy Organization of Iran Chief Mohammad Eslami stated in the interview that Tehran is prepared for "constructive" nuclear cooperation with the Gulf states. Eslami also suggested that the regime is seeking to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, which would reimpose constraints on Iranian nuclear activities. This interview comes as Western and Israeli media have reported that Saudi leaders are seeking help from the United States to develop their own domestic nuclear program in exchange for normalizing ties with Israel.[24]

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