



Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies

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Iran's national security policy is arguably the product of overlapping and sometimes competing priorities such as the ideology of Iran's Islamic revolution, perception of threats to the regime and to the country, and long-standing national interests. Iran's leadership has:

- Sought to deter or thwart any effort to invade or intimidate Iran or to bring about a change of regime.
- Taken advantage of regional conflicts to advance a broader goal of overturning a power structure in the Middle East that it asserts favors the United States, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and other Sunni Muslim Arab regimes.
- Sought to restore a sense of "greatness" reminiscent of ancient Persian empires.
- Provided material support to regional allied governments and armed factions, including increasingly precise missile systems that enable Iran to project power.
- Supported acts of international terrorism, as the "leading" or "most active" state sponsor of terrorism, according to annual State Department reports on international terrorism.
- Backed actions against international shipping in the Persian Gulf and in Iraq that represent, in part, an attempt to pressure the United States to relax sanctions on Iran. These actions have continued despite Iran's struggles with the effects of the COVID-19 outbreak there.

The Trump Administration has demanded that Iran end its Iran's "malign activities," as well as alter other objectionable behaviors, as conditions for a revised nuclear deal and normalization of relations with the United States. The Trump Administration has articulated U.S. strategy as:

- Applying "maximum pressure" on Iran's economy and regime through sanctions. President Trump withdrew the United States from the 2015 multilateral nuclear deal on May 8, 2018, and reimposed all U.S. sanctions as of November 5, 2018.
- Attempting to diplomatically, politically, and economically isolate Iran.
- Undertaking retaliatory actions against attacks on U.S. forces and installations by Iran-backed forces in the region.
- Deploying additional U.S. forces to deter further Iran-backed attacks and interdicting Iranian arms shipments to its allies and proxies.
- Training, arming, and providing counterterrorism assistance to partner governments and some allied substate actors in the region.

The incoming Biden Administration has indicated that it will seek to rejoin the Iran nuclear agreement if Iran comes back into full compliance with its terms. President-elect Biden has said his administration would conduct follow-on negotiations with Iran to address other outstanding U.S. concerns about Iranian behavior, particularly Iran's development of ballistic missiles.

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Introduction

Successive U.S. Administrations have identified Iran as a significant national security challenge. The Trump Administration has articulated its assessment of the threat posed by Iran in testimony by U.S. officials, statements, and reports such as an annual Defense Department report on Iran's military power required by successive National Defense Authorization Acts (NDAAAs) and a State Department report (2018 and 2020) entitled "Outlaw Regime: A Chronicle of Iran's Destructive Activities."¹ This report analyzes Iran's foreign and defense policies and capabilities to implement its policies. Analysis of U.S.-Iran tensions since mid-2019 can be found in: CRS Report R45795, *U.S.-Iran Conflict and Implications for U.S. Policy*, by Kenneth Katzman, Kathleen J. McInnis, and Clayton Thomas.

Drivers of Iran's Policy

Iran's foreign and defense policies are arguably the products of overlapping, and sometimes contradictory, motivations. Some experts have assessed that Iran has not decided whether it is a "nation, or a cause."²

Threat Perception

Iran's leaders are apparently motivated at least partly by their perception of threats the United States and its allies pose to their regime and their national interests.

- Supreme Leader Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i, Iran's paramount decisionmaker since 1989, has repeatedly claimed that the United States seeks to overturn Iran's regime.
- Khamene'i and other Iranian leaders assert that the Trump Administration's policy of applying "maximum pressure" on Iran primarily through economic sanctions represents U.S. economic war against Iran.
- Iran's leaders say that the U.S. military presence in and around the Persian Gulf region reflects intent to intimidate or attack Iran.³
- Iran's leaders have described U.S. support for regional Sunni Arab regimes as empowering radical Sunni Islamist groups such as the Islamic State.⁴

¹ Defense Intelligence Agency. Iran Military Power: 2019. Released November 2019. The FY2016 and FY2017 NDAAAs (P.L. 114-92 and P.L. 114-328) extended the annual DOD reporting requirement until the end of 2025 and required that the report include information on Iran's offensive and defensive cyber capabilities, and its cooperation with other state or non-state actors to conduct or mask its cyber operations. The 2020 version of the State Department "Outlaw Regime" report can be accessed at: <https://www.state.gov/outlaw-regime-a-chronicle-of-irans-destructive-activities-2020/>

² Doyle McManus. Column: Iran's dilemma: a country or a cause. Los Angeles Times, January 24, 2016.

³ Erik Slavin. "Iran Emphasizes Nuclear Reconciliation, Criticizes U.S. Military Posture in Persian Gulf." *Stars and Stripes*, March 5, 2014.

⁴ US 'created Isis' and its war on the terrorists is 'a lie', says Iran's Supreme Leader. The Independent, June 13, 2017.

Ideology

The ideology of Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution—which replaced a secular, authoritarian leader with a Shia cleric-dominated regime—still infuses Iran's foreign policy.

- During the 1980s, Iran supported regional Shia Islamist dissident movements in several regional countries in an attempt to “export” its revolution, but Iran scaled back that activity in the 1990s.⁵ However, the 2003 U.S.-led overthrow of Iraq’s Saddam Hussein, and conflicts in the region that arose from the 2011 “Arab Spring,” gave Iran opportunity to expand its influence.
- Iran’s leaders assert that the political structure of the Middle East is heavily weighted in favor of the United States and its regional allies and against those who Iranian leaders describe as “oppressed peoples,” such as the Palestinians and Shia Muslims. Shias are politically and economically disadvantaged minorities in many countries of the region. Iranian leaders claim that Western intervention and the creation of Israel have distorted the region’s politics and economics.
- Iranian leaders frequently assert that the Islamic revolution made Iran independent of U.S. influence and that the country’s foreign policy is intended, at least in part, to ensure that the United States cannot interfere in Iran’s domestic affairs.⁶ They cite as evidence of past U.S. interference the 1953 U.S.-backed overthrow of elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq and U.S. backing for Saddam Hussein’s regime in the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War.
- Iran claims its ideology is not sectarian, citing its support for Sunni groups such as Hamas.

National Interests

Iran’s national interests sometimes conflict with Iran’s ideology.

- Iran’s leaders stress that Iran’s well-developed civilization and historic independence give it a right to be recognized as a major power in the region.⁷ They contrast Iran’s history with that of the six Persian Gulf monarchy states (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman of the Gulf Cooperation Council, GCC), most of which gained independence in the 1960s and 1970s. Many of Iran’s foreign policy actions are similar to those undertaken by the Shah of Iran and prior Iranian dynasties.
- Iran has sometimes tempered its commitment to aid other Shias to promote its geopolitical interests. For example, it has supported mostly Christian-inhabited Armenia, rather than Shia-inhabited Azerbaijan, in part to thwart cross-border Azeri nationalism among Iran’s large Azeri minority.
- Iranian officials have sought to engage with some historic U.S. allies in the region, such as Turkey, to parry U.S. sanctions and consolidate Iran’s position in Syria.

⁵ Soner Cagaptay, James F. Jeffrey, and Mehdi Khalaji. “Iran Won’t Give Up on Its Revolution.” *New York Times*, op-ed, April 26, 2015.

⁶ Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Chapter Ten: Foreign Policy.

⁷ Itamar Rabinovich. How Iran’s regional ambitions have developed since 1979. Brookings Institution, January 24, 2019.

Factional Interests, Competition, and Public Opinion

Iran's foreign policy often appears to reflect differing approaches among key actors and groups.

- Supreme Leader Khamene'i sits as the apex of several decisionmaking and advisory councils that are dominated by hardliners. He is also constitutionally the Commander-in-Chief of Iran's armed forces, which include the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The IRGC is the military and internal security force created after the Islamic revolution, and its Qods Force provides support to regional armed factions and allied governments.
- More moderate Iranian leaders, including President Hassan Rouhani, argue that a pragmatic foreign policy helps Iran build outside support for Iran's positions.
- It is difficult to assess the relationship between public opinion and Iranian foreign policy. In recent years, protesters have expressed opposition to the use of Iran's financial resources for regional interventions rather than to improve domestic living standards, but the regime has not shifted its regional policies.

Instruments of Iran's National Security Strategy

Iran employs a number of different methods and mechanisms to implement its foreign policy.

Support to Allied Regimes and Groups and Use of Terrorism

Iran uses support for armed factions as an instrument of policy. Iran has helped establish some groups, such as Lebanese Hezbollah and various Iraqi Shia factions, and subsequently provided them with arms and finances to build them into powerful militias and political movements. These groups have acquired significant political legitimacy and won seats in national parliamentary elections and places in governmental cabinets, in some cases helping select national leaders.⁸

- For more than two decades, the annual State Department report on international terrorism has characterized Iran as “the most active” or the “foremost” state sponsor of terrorism because it provides arms, training, and military advisers in support of allied governments and movements, some of which are named by the United States as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs).⁹ Iran was placed on the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism (“terrorism list”) in January 1984.
- Iran supports the regime of President Bashar Al Asad of Syria, Lebanese Hezbollah, Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups, Houthi rebels in Yemen, Shia militias in Iraq, and underground groups in Bahrain.¹⁰ The Houthis and the Taliban, are not named as FTOs.
- Iran's operations in support of its allies are carried out by the Qods (Jerusalem) Force of the IRGC (IRGC-QF). That force, estimated by the Defense Intelligence

⁸ Iran's Playbook: Deconstructing Tehran's Regional Strategy. The Soufan Center, May 14, 2019.

⁹ The other countries on the terrorism list are Syria and North Korea. Sudan was removed from the list in December 2020.

¹⁰ The State Department “Country Reports on Terrorism: 2019” and “Outlaw Regime: A Chronicle of Iran’s Destructive Activities: 2020 Edition.”

Agency to have about 5,000 personnel,¹¹ was headed by IRGC Major General Qasem Soleimani, until the U.S. airstrike that killed him on January 3, 2020. His successor is Esma'il Qaani, who was appointed soon after Soleimani's death and who has continued virtually all the same operations that Soleimani was running.

- IRGC and IRGC-QF leaders typically publicly acknowledge that Iran is supporting its regional allies,¹² although they often characterize Iran's support as humanitarian aid, protection for Shia religious sites, or support that was specifically requested by a host government. Much of the weaponry Iran supplies to its allies includes specialized anti-tank systems ("explosively forced projectiles" EFPs), artillery rockets, mortars, short-range ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and drones.¹³
- Iran opposes Sunni terrorist groups that work against Iran's core interests, such as the Islamic State. Iran has expelled some Al Qaeda activists who it had allowed to take refuge there after the September 11, 2001, attacks, but some reportedly remain, perhaps in an effort by Iran to exert leverage against the United States or Saudi Arabia. Iran might also calculate that allowing a presence of Al Qaeda operatives might cause that organization to refrain from attacking Iran. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo has linked Iran and Al Qaeda, saying that "[Iran has] hosted Al Qaida. They have permitted Al Qaida to transit their country. [There's] no doubt there is a connection between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Al Qaida. Period. Full stop."¹⁴ Other analyses have characterized the relationship between Iran and Al Qaeda as "an on-again, off-again marriage of convenience pockmarked by bouts of bitter acrimony."¹⁵ In August 2020, an Al Qaeda figure involved in the 1998 bombings of U.S. Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania – Abu Muhammad al-Masri - was reportedly assassinated in Iran, possibly by Israeli agents.¹⁶

¹¹ DIA. Iran Military Power: 2019, op cit.

¹² *Al Jazeera*, August 20, 2016.

¹³ Farzin Nadimi. "How Iran's Revived Weapons Exports Could Boost its Proxies." Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 17, 2015.

¹⁴ Secretary of State Pompeo Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. April 10, 2019.

¹⁵ Ned Price, "Why Mike Pompeo Released More bin Laden Files," *Atlantic*, November 8, 2017. See also Barbara Slavin, "Expediency and betrayal: Iran's relationship with al-Qaeda," *Al-Monitor Iran Pulse*, September 7, 2018.

¹⁶ "Al Qaeda's No. 2, Accused in U.S. Embassy Attacks, Was Killed in Iran." *New York Times*, November 13, 2020.

The late IRGC-QF Commander Qasem Soleimani and his Successor, Esmail Qaani



Qasem Soleimani joined the IRGC at its inception in 1979, serving in his home province and participating in post-revolution suppression of Kurdish insurgents in northwestern Iran. He commanded an IRGC unit and then its 41st Sarollah Division during the Iran-Iraq war. He was appointed commander of the IRGC-QF in 1997. Soleimani's success in expanding Iran's regional influence through the IRGC-QF's formation of pro-Iranian militias in several countries made him a national hero in Iran, and vast crowds attended his funeral in Iran after his death from the January 3, 2020, airstrike. The regime afforded him wide publicity inside Iran as an able strategist.

Within days of Soleimani's death, Supreme Leader Khamene'i announced that he was appointing deputy IRGC-QF commander, IRGC Brigadier General Esmail Qaani (pictured above) as the head of the Qods Force. Qaani had been appointed deputy IRGC-QF commander simultaneous with Soleimani's appointment to command the force. Qaani and other IRGC figures have stated that Qods Force operations would proceed as they were under Soleimani. On the other hand, Qaani is widely considered less charismatic than Soleimani and perhaps less familiar with Iraqi, Syrian, and Lebanese allies of Iran than was Soleimani. Qaani, who is about 62 years of age, is not expected to have the degree of autonomy that Soleimani enjoyed, at least not initially. Qaani has been sanctioned by the United States under various Executive Orders, as was Soleimani. On January 20, 2020, the IRGC commander-in-chief appointed Mohammad Hossein-Zadeh Hejazi as deputy IRGC-QF commander. Hejazi, who is about the same age as Qaani, served as head of the Basij, the IRGC's militia that focuses on internal security, during 1998–2007. Hejazi is considered a close ally of IRGC commander-in-chief Hossein Salami.¹⁷

Direct Military Action/Cyberattacks

- Iran sometimes undertakes direct military action, including from its own territory. Iran's use of such action increased in 2019 in conjunction with its efforts to exert pressure on the Trump Administration to relax sanctions on Iran. In mid-2019, IRGC Navy forces seized and attacked several commercial ships in the Gulf.¹⁸ Iran periodically conducts "high speed intercepts" of U.S. ships in the Persian Gulf. The latest such incident occurred in mid-April 2020.
- In September and October 2018, Iran fired missiles at a Kurdish opposition group based in northern Iraq and at Islamic State positions in Syria.
- In September 2019, Iran struck key Saudi oil facilities with land-attack cruise missiles. In January 2020, Iran responded to the U.S. strike that killed Qasem Soleimani by firing ballistic missiles on bases in Iraq used by U.S. forces.
- Since 2012, Iran has dedicated significant resources toward cyberespionage and has conducted cyberattacks against the United States and U.S. allies in the

¹⁷ Ali Alfoneh. Who is Mohammad Hossein-Zadeh Hejazi, the New Deputy Commander of Iran's Qods Force? Washington Institute for Near East Policy. January 22, 2020.

¹⁸ Department of State Fact Sheet. "Iran's History of Naval Provocations" April 23, 2020.

Persian Gulf. Government-supported Iranian hackers have conducted a series of cyberattacks against oil and gas companies in the Persian Gulf.¹⁹

Other Political Action/Soft Power

Iran's national security is not limited to militarily supporting allies and armed factions.

- A wide range of observers report that Iran has provided funding to political candidates in neighboring Iraq and Afghanistan to cultivate allies there. Iran also funds some Islamic charity organizations that might build some positive regional sentiment about Iran.
- Iran has provided direct payments to leaders of neighboring states to gain and maintain their support. In 2010, then-President of Afghanistan Hamid Karzai publicly acknowledged that his office had received cash payments from Iran.²⁰
- Iran has established some training and education programs that bring young Muslims to study in Iran.²¹
- Iran has built economic ties to its neighbors, including by providing credits, subsidized energy and electricity sales, and investments, as part of an effort to build political influence throughout the region. Iran has also welcomed investment by China as part of that country's region-wide "Belt and Road Initiative" to develop trade routes from China to nearby developing countries.

¹⁹ Letter to SFRC Chairman Bob Corker, including report to Congress pursuant to the Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act. Letter dated August 29, 2018. For more information, see CRS In Focus IF11406, *Iranian Offensive Cyberattack Capabilities*, by Catherine A. Theohary.

²⁰ Karzai says his office gets "bags of money" from Iran. Reuters, October 25, 2010.

²¹ How Iran Exports its Ideology. United Against Nuclear Iran, March 2020.

Table 1. Major Iran or Iran-Related Terrorism Attacks or Plots

Date	Incident/Event	Claimed/Likely Perpetrator
November 4, 1979	U.S. Embassy in Tehran seized and 66 U.S. diplomats held for 444 days (until January 21, 1981).	Hardline Iranian regime supporters and elements
April 18, 1983	Truck bombing of U.S. Embassy in Beirut, Lebanon. 63 dead, including 17 U.S. citizens.	Factions that eventually formed Lebanese Hezbollah claimed responsibility
October 23, 1983	Truck bombing of U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut. 241 Marines killed.	Same as above
December 12, 1983	Bombings of U.S. and French embassies in Kuwait City. 5 fatalities.	Da'wa Party of Iraq. 17 Da'wa activists imprisoned in Kuwait
March 16, 1984	U.S. Embassy Beirut Political Officer William Buckley taken hostage in Beirut, others later. Last hostage released December 1991.	Factions that formed Lebanese Hezbollah
September 20, 1984	Truck bombing of U.S. embassy annex in Beirut. 23 killed.	Factions that formed Hezbollah
July 31, 1984	Air France aircraft hijacked to Iran	Factions that formed Hezbollah
May 25, 1985	Bombing of Amir of Kuwait's motorcade	Da'wa Party of Iraq
June 14, 1985	Hijacking of TWA Flight 847. One fatality, Navy diver Robert Stetham.	Hezbollah
1985-1986	Soft targets in Paris bombed, killing 12	Hezbollah/Iran intelligence
February 17, 1988	Col. William Higgins, serving with U.N. peacekeeping force, kidnapped and later killed in south Lebanon.	Hezbollah
April 5, 1988	Hijacking of Kuwait Air passenger plane. Two killed.	Hezbollah
July 13, 1989	Assassination of Iranian Kurdish leader Qassemlu	Hezbollah/Iran
August 5, 1991	Assassination of former Prime Minister Bakhtiar	Iran intelligence
March 17, 1992	Bombing of Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires. 29 killed.	Hezbollah, assisted by Iranian intelligence/diplomats
July 18, 1994	Bombing of Argentine-Jewish Mutual Association (AMIA) building in Buenos Aires	Same as above
June 25, 1996	Bombing of Khobar Towers housing complex near Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. 19 U.S. Air Force killed.	Saudi Hezbollah, but some point to Al Qaeda
October 11, 2011	U.S. Justice Dept. unveiled discovery of alleged plot involving at least one IRGC-QF officer to assassinate Saudi Ambassador in Washington, DC.	IRGC-QF reportedly working with U.S.-based person and Mexican drug cartel
February 13, 2012	Wife of Israeli diplomat wounded in Delhi, India	Hezbollah
July 19, 2012	Bombing in Sofia, Bulgaria, killed five Israeli tourists.	Hezbollah, IRGC-QF

Sources and Notes Recent State Department Country Reports on Terrorism; State Department "Select Iran-Sponsored Operational Activity in Europe, 1979-2018 (July 5, 2018); various press. Table does not include suspected Iran/Hezbollah terrorist attack plots that were thwarted, such as the foiled alleged plots to attack Iranian dissidents in several European countries since 2017. Those plots are discussed in the "Europe" section below, and are listed in the State Department's 2018 and 2020 "Outlaw Regime" reports on Iran, cited above.

Diplomacy

Iran also uses traditional diplomatic tools.

- Iran maintains embassies or representation in all countries with which it has diplomatic relations. Khamene'i has not left Iran since becoming Supreme Leader in 1989, but he hosts foreign leaders in Tehran. Iranian presidents travel outside Iran regularly, including to countries allied with the United States.
- From August 2012 until August 2015, Iran held the presidency of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which has about 120 member states and generally shares Iran's criticisms of great power influence over global affairs. In August 2012, Iran hosted the NAM annual summit.
- Iran is a party to nonproliferation conventions, including the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). Iran insists that it has adhered to all its commitments, but the international community asserts that Iran has not met all its obligations.

Iran attends meetings of and seeks full membership in regional organizations including the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). It has sought to join the World Trade Organization (WTO) since the mid-1990s, unsuccessfully to date.

Iran's Nuclear and Defense Programs

Iran is pursuing a wide range of defense programs, as well as a nuclear program that the international community perceived could be intended to eventually produce a nuclear weapon.

Nuclear Program²²

Iran's nuclear program has been a paramount U.S. concern, in part because Iran's acquisition of an operational nuclear weapon could embolden it to undertake more assertive action in the region and could produce a regional nuclear arms race. Some Iranian leaders argue that a nuclear weapon could reduce Iran's vulnerability to invasion or outside regime change attempts. Iranian leaders assert that their ideology forbids developing a nuclear weapon and claim that Iran's nuclear program is for medical and electricity generation purposes.

In 2015, the Obama Administration asserted that Iran could produce enough fissile material for a nuclear weapon within two to three months of a decision to do so. Under the 2015 multilateral nuclear agreement (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA), Iran agreed to limits on its nuclear program that U.S. officials said increased the "breakout time"—an all-out effort by Iran to develop a nuclear weapon—to at least 12 months. The JCPOA was the product of a diplomatic effort that France, the United Kingdom, and Germany (the "EU-3") undertook in 2003, and which yielded a November 14, 2004, "Paris Agreement," under which Iran suspended uranium enrichment in exchange for trade talks and other non-U.S. aid. The agreement broke down in August 2005. In May 2006, the Bush Administration joined an expanded Iran nuclear negotiating group called the "Permanent Five Plus 1" (P5+1: United States, Russia, China, France, Britain, and Germany), whose negotiating position was strengthened, in part, by U.N. Security Council resolutions that imposed sanctions on Iran. U.N. Security Council resolution 1929 (June 9, 2010)

²² See also: CRS Report R43333, *Iran Nuclear Agreement and U.S. Exit*, by Paul K. Kerr and Kenneth Katzman.

linked Iran's economy to its nuclear capabilities, authorizing U.N. member states to sanction key Iranian economic sectors. An annex offered incentives to Iran if it ceased uranium enrichment.²³

Subsequent negotiations in December 2010, in Geneva and January 2011, in Istanbul floundered over Iran's demand for immediate lifting of international sanctions. Additional rounds of P5+1-Iran talks in 2012 and 2013 (2012: April in Istanbul; May in Baghdad; and June in Moscow; 2013: Almaty, Kazakhstan, in February and in April) did not reach agreement.

Interim and Comprehensive Nuclear Deals²⁴

The June 2013 election of the relatively moderate Hassan Rouhani as Iran's president improved the prospects for a nuclear settlement. Aided in part by private talks between U.S. and Iranian officials in Oman that began in early 2013, an interim nuclear agreement, the Joint Plan of Action (JPA), was announced on November 24, 2013, providing modest sanctions relief in exchange for Iran accepting some limits on uranium enrichment. On April 2, 2015, the P5+1 and Iran reached a framework for a "Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action" (JCPOA), and finalized an accord on July 14, 2015. U.N. Security Council Resolution 2231 of July 20, 2015, endorsed the JCPOA, restricted Iran's importation or exportation of conventional arms (for up to five years), and called on Iran not to develop or test ballistic missiles capable of delivering a nuclear weapon (for up to eight years). On January 16, 2016, the IAEA certified that Iran completed the work required for sanctions relief and "Implementation Day" was declared.

On May 8, 2018, based on criticism that the JCPOA did not address key U.S. concerns about Iran's continuing "malign activities" in the region or its ballistic missile program, and the expiration of its key nuclear restrictions,²⁵ President Trump withdrew the United States from the JCPOA and reimposed all U.S. sanctions as of November 5, 2018. Since May 2019, the Trump Administration has imposed additional sanctions on Iran's economy. Iran has responded with "reduced compliance" with the JCPOA as well as conducted actions against international shipping in the Persian Gulf, missile attacks on Saudi oil facilities, and Iran-backed attacks on bases and installations in Iraq used by U.S. forces. In an editorial on September 13, 2020, former Vice President Joseph Biden, the presumptive winner of the 2020 election, stated that an intent to rejoin the JCPOA if Iran comes back into full compliance with its terms.²⁶

Missile Programs and Chemical and Biological Weapons Capability

Iran has an active missile development program, as well as other WMD programs at varying stages of activity and capability, as discussed further below.

Missiles²⁷

U.S. official reports assess that Iran has the largest ballistic missile force in the Middle East, with a stockpile of hundreds of missiles that threaten its neighbors in the region and missiles that can

²³ Text of the resolution is at http://www.isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/Draft_resolution_on_Iran_annexes.pdf.

²⁴ For detail, see CRS Report R43333, *Iran Nuclear Agreement and U.S. Exit*, by Paul K. Kerr and Kenneth Katzman.

²⁵ Department of State. Press Briefing by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. August 1, 2017.

²⁶ Joseph R. Biden editorial "Joe Biden: There's a smarter way to be tough on Iran." CNN, September 13, 2020.

²⁷ For more information, see CRS Report R42849, *Iran's Ballistic Missile and Space Launch Programs*, by Steven A. Hildreth.

strike targets up to 2,000 kilometers from Iran's borders.²⁸ U.S. officials assess that "Iran's work on a space launch vehicle (SLV)—including on its *Simorgh*—shortens the timeline to an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) ICBM because SLVs and ICBMs use similar technologies."²⁹

Iran appears to be emphasizing the provision to its allies and proxies of short-range ballistic and cruise missiles, largely because these weapons enable Iran, through its allies, to project power in the region. The U.S. intelligence community has said in recent years that Iran "continues to develop and improve a range of new military capabilities to target U.S. and allied military assets in the region, including armed UAVs, ballistic missiles, advanced naval mines, unmanned explosive boats, submarines and advanced torpedoes, and anti-ship and land-attack cruise missiles (LACMs)."³⁰ Iran's LACMs apparently were used in the September 14, 2019, attack on Saudi critical energy infrastructure that successfully avoided U.S.-supplied air defenses. Iran also fired ballistic missiles at the Ayn Al Asad air base in Iraq on January 8, 2020, in retaliation for the U.S. strike that killed IRGC-QF commander Qasem Soleimani. The attacks indicated that Iran's missile capabilities might be more advanced and more precise than was widely assessed in prior years.

Iran's missile programs are run by the IRGC Aerospace Force, particularly the Al Ghadir Missile Command—an entity sanctioned under Executive Order 13382. Iran's missiles reportedly have been engineered based on missiles Iran acquired many years ago from countries of the former Soviet Union. There are persistent reports that Iran-North Korea missile cooperation is extensive, but it is not known whether North Korea and Iran have recently exchanged missile hardware.

Resolution 2231 (the operative Security Council resolution on Iran) "calls on" Iran not to develop or test ballistic missiles "designed to be capable of" delivering a nuclear weapon, for up to eight years from Adoption Day of the JCPOA (October 18, 2015) - less restrictive than that of Resolution 1929, which prohibited Iran's development of nuclear-capable ballistic missiles. The JCPOA itself does not specifically contain ballistic missile restraints.

- On October 11, 2015, and reportedly again on November 21, 2015, Iran tested a 1,200-mile-range ballistic missile.
- Iran conducted ballistic missile tests on March 8-9, 2016, two months after the JCPOA went into effect (January 16, 2016).
- Iran reportedly conducted a missile test in May 2016, although Iranian media had varying accounts of the range of the missile tested.
- A July 11, 2016, test of a missile of a range of 2,500 miles, akin to North Korea's Musudan missile, reportedly failed.³¹
- On January 29, 2017, Iran tested what outside experts called a Khorramshahr missile. Press reports say the test failed.
- On July 27, 2017, Iran's *Simorgh* rocket launched a satellite into space, but a January 15, 2019 *Simorgh* launch failed to orbit a communications satellite.
- On December 1, 2018, Secretary of State Pompeo stated that Iran had test fired a medium-range ballistic missile "capable of carrying multiple warheads."

²⁸ "Iran: No Need to Extend 2,000 km Ballistic Missile Range." Al Jazeera, October 31, 2017.

²⁹ Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community. Testimony before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. January 29, 2019.

³⁰ Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community, op cit.

³¹ Lucas Tomlinson. "Iran Conducts 4th Missile Test Since Signing Nuke Deal." Fox News, July 15, 2016.

- In August 2019, a pre-launch explosion of an Iranian rocket suggested that Iran's development of significant space vehicles continues to encounter problems.
- On February 9, 2020, Iran failed to lift a communications satellite into orbit, but on April 22, 2020, the IRGC claimed to have launched a military satellite into orbit successfully using its *Qassed* launch vehicle.
- Iran continues to periodically test short-range ballistic missiles.

U.S. and U.N. Responses to Iran's Missile Programs³²

Iran asserts that conventionally armed ballistic missiles are essential to its defense. The Obama Administration termed Iran's post-Implementation Day ballistic missile tests as "provocative and destabilizing" and "inconsistent with" Resolution 2231. The Trump Administration has termed Iran's space vehicles launch as "violations" of the Resolution because of their inherent capability to carry a nuclear warhead. The U.N. Security Council has not imposed sanctions on Iran for any missile tests to date. On April 22, 2020, Secretary of State Pompeo said that the IRGC's satellite launch that day belied Iran's statements that its space launch program was purely for commercial purposes.

The United States and Israel have a broad program of cooperation on missile defense against a wide range of Iranian and Iran-supplied short and longer range missiles, including the Arrow missile defense system, Iron Dome, and David's Sling. Through sales of the Patriot system (PAC-3) and more advanced "THAAD" (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) to the Gulf states, the United States has sought to construct a coordinated GCC missile defense system. The United States has emplaced missile defense systems in various Eastern European countries and on ships.

³² Under Section 1226 of the FY2017 National Defense Authorization Act (S. 2943, P.L. 114-328) the Administration must submit quarterly reports to Congress on Iranian missile launches in the preceding year, and on efforts to impose sanctions on entities assisting those launches. See CRS Report RS20871, *Iran Sanctions*, by Kenneth Katzman.

Table 2. Iran's Missile and Drone Arsenal

Shahab-3 ("Meteor")	The 600-mile-range Shahab-3 is considered operational, and Tehran is trying to improve its accuracy and lethality. Extended-range variants of this missiles include: Sijil, Ashoura, Emad, Ghadr, and Khorramshahr, with ranges of about 1,000-1,200 miles, putting the Middle East region within reach. Some use solid fuel.
BM-25/Musudan Variant	This missile, with a reported range of up to 2,500 miles, is of North Korean design, and in turn based on the Soviet-era "SS-N-6" missile. Reports in 2006 that North Korea supplied the missile or components of it to Iran have not been corroborated, but Iran reportedly tried to test its version of it in July 2016.
Short-Range Ballistic Missiles	Iran fields a wide variety of increasingly capable short-range ballistic missiles (150-400 mile ranges) such as A few hundred <i>Shahab-1</i> (Scud-b), <i>Shahab-2</i> (Scud-C), and <i>Tondar-69</i> (CSS-8) missiles; the <i>Qiam</i> (400-mile range), first tested in August 2010; the <i>Fateh 110</i> and <i>313</i> and <i>Hormuz</i> solid fuel missiles and a related <i>Khaliji Fars</i> (50-to 200-mile-range) missiles. Iran reportedly has transferred some of these missiles to its allies in Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and Iraq.
Anti-Ship and Coastal Defense Cruise Missiles	Iran has bought and/or developed a number of cruise missiles. In the early 1990s, Iran armed its patrol boats with Chinese-made C-802 anti-ship cruise missiles and Iranian variants of that weapon (<i>Noor</i> , <i>Ghadir</i> , <i>Nasr</i>). Iran also bought and emplaced cruise missiles along its coast, including the Chinese-made CSSC-2 (Silkworm) and the CSSC-3 (Seersucker). Supplied also to: Hezbollah and the Houthis, the latter of which have employed them against U.S. and UAE ships in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait.
Land Attack Cruise Missiles	Iran apparently reverse-engineered the Soviet-designed KH-55 land attack cruise missile as the Iran-branded <i>Meshkat</i> , <i>Soumar</i> , and <i>Hoveyzedeh</i> missiles, with Iran-claimed range 1,200 miles. Later versions based on the <i>Soumar</i> , reportedly used in the September 14 attacks on Saudi Arabia, are named the <i>Qods-I</i> and <i>Ya Ali</i> , some of which may have been provided to the Houthis.
Anti-Tank Guided Missiles	Iran has developed the <i>Toophan</i> and <i>Tosan</i> anti-tank guided missile. Some have been seized in Houthi arms caches or in boats bound for delivery to the Houthis.
Surface-to-Air Missiles (SAM)	Iran has a number of air defense SAMs, commanded by the Khatem ol-Anbiya Air Defense Headquarters. The inventory includes the SA-20C (Russian-made, often called the S-300), delivered in 2016. Iran has developed its own "Sayyad 2C" missile and allegedly supplied it to the Houthis in Yemen to target aircraft from the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen. Iran also has some medium- and short-range SAMs, including I-Hawks provided by the United States during the Iran-Contra scandal.
Rockets	Iran developed the <i>Fajr</i> rocket and has supplied it to Hezbollah, Hamas, and militants in Afghanistan. The <i>Fajr</i> has a range of about 40 miles.
ICBMs	An ICBM is a ballistic missile with a range of 5,500 kilometers (about 2,900 miles). After long estimating that Iran might have an ICBM capability by 2010, the U.S. intelligence community has not stated that Iran has produced an ICBM, to date.
Space Vehicles	In February 2009, Iran successfully launched a small, low-earth satellite on a <i>Safir-2</i> rocket (range about 155 miles), and a satellite carrying a small primate in December 2013. Some launches of the <i>Simorgh</i> space launch vehicle have since failed and others appear to have succeeded in putting satellites into orbit.
Warheads	A <i>Wall Street Journal</i> report of September 14, 2005, said U.S. intelligence believes Iran worked to adapt the Shahab-3 to deliver a nuclear warhead. Subsequent press reports said that U.S. intelligence captured an Iranian computer in mid-2004 showing plans to construct a nuclear warhead for the Shahab. ³³ No further information since.

Sources: Testimony of U.S. intelligence community officials, 2005-20120; DOD annual report on Iranian military power; various press. Statement by State Department Iran policy official Brian Hook. November 29, 2018.

³³ William Broad and David Sanger, "Relying On Computer, U.S. Seeks to Prove Iran's Nuclear Aims," *New York Times*, November 13, 2005.

Chemical and Biological Weapons³⁴

Iran is widely believed to be unlikely to use chemical or biological weapons or to transfer them to its regional proxies or allies because of the potential for international powers to discover their origin and retaliate against Iran for any use. Iran signed the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) on January 13, 1993, and ratified it on June 8, 1997. According to an April 2019 State Department report:³⁵

United States certifies Iran is in non-compliance with the CWC due to (1) its failure to declare its transfer of CW to Libya during the 1978-1987 Libya-Chad war, (2) its failure to declare its complete holdings of Riot Control Agents (RCAs), and (3) its failure to submit a complete Chemical Weapons Production Facility (CWPF) declaration. Further, the United States has serious concerns that Iran is pursuing pharmaceutical-based agents (PBAs) for offensive purposes.

Iran also has ratified the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC), but it engages in dual-use activities with possible biological weapons applications that could potentially be inconsistent with the convention.

Conventional and “Asymmetric Warfare” Capability³⁶

Iran’s forces are widely assessed as incapable of defeating the United States in a classic military confrontation, but they are able to strike the U.S. military, as evidenced by Iran’s retaliatory missile strike on Ayn Al Asad base in Iraq in January 2020. Iran appears to be able to defend against aggression from its neighbors.

Iran’s armed forces are organizationally divided and perform functions appropriate to their roles. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC, known in Persian as the *Sepah-e-Pasdaran Enghelab Islami*)³⁷ has a national defense role, a foreign policy role, and an internal security function. This latter task is implemented primarily through the *Basij* (Mobilization of the Oppressed) volunteer militia. In April 2019, Khamenei appointed as IRGC Commander-in-Chief Maj. Gen. Hossein Salami, replacing Maj. Gen. Mohammad Ali Jafari. Both are hardliners.

The IRGC and the regular military (*Artesh*)—the national army that predated Iran’s 1979 revolution—report to Supreme Leader Khamenei through a Joint Headquarters. The Chief of Staff (head) of the Joint Headquarters has been headed since June 2016 by IRGC Major General Mohammad Hossein Bagheri, an early IRGC recruit who fought against a post-revolution Kurdish uprising and in the Iran-Iraq War. Bagheri’s appointment again demonstrated the IRGC’s dominance within Iran’s security structure. However, Rouhani’s August 2017 appointment of a senior *Artesh* figure, Brigadier General Amir Hatami, as Defense Minister suggests that the *Artesh* remains respected and influential. The *Artesh* is deployed mainly at bases outside cities and has historically refused to play any role in internal security.

³⁴ Information in this section is derived from the August 2018 Administration report to Congress under the Countering America’s Adversaries through Sanctions Act.

³⁵ Department of State. Bureau of Arms Control, Verification, and Compliance. Compliance With the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling, and Use of Chemical Weapons and on Their Destruction (Condition (10)(C) Report) – 2019. April 15, 2019.

³⁶ For detailed analysis of Iran’s military strategy, doctrine, procurement policy, and related issues, see International Institute for Strategic Studies. “Gulf Security after 2020.” December 2017.

³⁷ For a more extensive discussion of the IRGC, see Katzman, Kenneth, “The Warriors of Islam: Iran’s Revolutionary Guard,” *Westview Press*, 1993.

Air Force Organization. The regular air force (Islamic Republic of Iran Air Force, IRIAF) operates most of Iran’s traditional combat aircraft. The IRGC Aerospace Force operates Iran’s missile force, in part through its Al Ghadir missile command. It does not operate sophisticated combat aircraft.

Naval Forces Organization. The IRGC Navy (IRGCN) and regular Navy (Islamic Republic of Iran Navy, IRIN) also are separate forces with distinct missions. The IRIN operates Iran’s larger warships and it operates in the Gulf of Oman, the Caspian Sea, and deep waters in the region and beyond, including the Atlantic Ocean. The IRGC Navy has responsibility for the closer-in Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz, to which its large inventory of small boats, including China-supplied patrol boats, are well-suited. In August 2018, the hardline IRGC General Alireza Tangsiri was appointed commander of the IRGC Navy. The IRIN controls Iran’s three Kilo-class submarines bought from Russia and 14 North Korea-designed “Yona” (Ghadir, Iranian variant) midget subs, according to DOD reports. Iran is also developing increasingly lethal systems such as advanced naval mines.

Asymmetric Warfare Capacity

While building up its conventional capabilities, Iran appears to focus most intently on “asymmetric warfare.” The IRGC Navy has developed forces and tactics to control the approaches to Iran, including the Strait of Hormuz, centering on an ability to “swarm” adversary naval assets with its fleet of small boats and to launch large numbers of anti-ship cruise missiles and coastal defense cruise missiles. Iran has added naval bases along its coast in recent years, enhancing its ability to threaten shipping in the strait. IRGC Navy vessels sometimes conduct “high-speed intercepts”—close-approaches of U.S. naval vessels in the Gulf. The latest incident occurred on April 15, 2020; no shots were fired by either the IRGC Navy or the U.S. Navy.³⁸

Iran’s arming of regional allies and proxies represents another aspect of Iran’s asymmetric capability. Iran’s allies and proxies control territory from which they can launch Iran-supplied missiles and rockets, and build military factories. These allies help Iran expand its influence and project power with little direct risk, giving Tehran a measure of deniability. Iran’s support for regional armed factions is discussed in depth later in this report.

Military-to-Military Relationships

Iran’s armed forces have few formal relationships with foreign militaries; its military-to-military relationships have tended to focus on Iranian arms purchases or upgrades. According to recent Administration reports, Iran has bought weaponry from Russia, China, North Korea, Belarus, and Ukraine, and has obtained missile and aircraft technology from foreign suppliers, including China and North Korea.³⁹ Iran and Russia have cooperated closely to assist the Asad regime in Syria. In August 2016, Iran allowed Russia’s bomber aircraft, for a brief time, to use Iran’s western airbase at Hamadan to launch strikes in Syria—the first time the Islamic Republic gave a foreign military use of Iran’s military facilities.⁴⁰ Iran and India maintain a “strategic dialogue,” and Iran has signed military cooperation agreements with Syria, Afghanistan, Sudan, Oman, Venezuela,

³⁸ U.S. Central Command. IRGCN Vessels Conduct Unsafe, Unprofessional Interaction with U.S. Naval Forces in Arabian Gulf. April 15, 2020.

³⁹ August 2018 report to Congress mandated by the Countering America’s Adversaries through Sanctions Act; Defense Intelligence Agency, “Iran Military Power: 2019.” Released October 2019.

⁴⁰ A provision of the House version of the FY2017 NDAA (Section 1259M of H.R. 4909) required an Administration report on Iran-Russia military cooperation worldwide, but the provision was removed in conference action.

Belarus, Russia, China, and South Africa.⁴¹ Some Iranian naval officers reportedly underwent some training in India in the 1990s, while also periodically conducting joint exercises with the Pakistani armed forces.

The IRIN (regular navy) appears to be trying to expand Iran's relationships through naval port visits, including to China (2013) and South Africa (2016). The IRIN has also, in recent years, made port visits to Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Azerbaijan, Indonesia, and South Africa, and held joint naval exercises with Oman, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Russia, China, Djibouti, and Italy. In September 2014, two Chinese warships docked at Iran's port of Bandar Abbas, for the first time in history, to conduct four days of naval exercises,⁴² and in October 2015, the leader of Iran's regular (not IRGC) Navy made the first visit ever to China by an Iranian Navy commander. In August 2017, the chief of Iran's joint military headquarters made the first top-level military visit to Turkey since Iran's 1979 revolution.

Iranian Arms Transfers and U.N. Restrictions

Sales to Iran of most conventional arms (those listed on a U.N. Register of Conventional Arms) were banned by U.N. Resolution 1929. Resolution 2231, which superseded that resolution, required Security Council approval for any transfer of specified weapons or military technology, or related training or financial assistance, to Iran for a maximum of five years from Adoption Day (until October 18, 2020). Resolution 2231 also required Security Council approval for Iranian transfers of any weaponry outside Iran for that same time period. Separate U.N. Security Council resolutions ban arms shipments by any state to such conflict areas as Yemen (Resolution 2216) and Lebanon (Resolution 1701). U.S. officials assert that Iran regularly violates this restriction, but the U.N. Security Council has not, to date, imposed additional sanctions for these violations. The ban was deemed by the Security Council to have expired as scheduled on October 18, 2020. Trump Administration efforts to extend the ban, and its insistence that all U.N. sanctions have been reimposed - can be found in: CRS In Focus IF11429, *U.N. Ban on Iran Arms Transfers and Sanctions Snapback*, by Kenneth Katzman.

Defense Budget

Iran's defense budget has in recent years run about \$10 billion - \$15 billion per year.⁴³ The Trump Administration asserts that its maximum pressure policy has caused Iran's defense budget to shrink an estimated 24% during Iran's 2020-2021 Iranian budget year, which ends in March 2020.⁴⁴ Of the defense budget, about two-thirds funds the IRGC and its subordinate units, and about one-third funds the regular military (*Artesh*) and its units. GCC combined defense spending is about \$100 billion in 2019.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Defense Intelligence Agency. Iran Military Power: 2019.

⁴² "China's Navy Sends Ships for Exercises with Iran." *New York Times*, September 22, 2014.

⁴³ Iran Military Spending/Defense Budget 1960-2020. Macrotrends, accessed April 2020.

⁴⁴ "Pompeo: Sanctions cut Iran's military budget by 24 percent." *Al Arabiya*, December 17, 2020.

⁴⁵ "Gulf States' Defence Budgets to Hit \$100bn in 2019: report." *Al Jazeera*, September 6, 2018.

Table 3. Iran's Conventional Military Arsenal

Military and Security Personnel	525,000 total military. Regular army (<i>Artesh</i>) ground force is about 350,000. IRGC ground force is about 100,000. IRGC Navy is about 20,000 and IRIN (regular navy) is about 18,000. Air Force has about 30,000 personnel and IRGC Aerospace Force (which runs Iran's missile programs) is of unknown size. IRGC-Qods Force numbers about 5,000. Security forces number about 40,000-60,000 law enforcement forces, and about 100,000 Basij (volunteer militia under IRGC control) performing security duties as well. Hundreds of thousands of additional Basij could be mobilized in an all-out war.
Tanks	1,650+ Includes 480 Russian-made T-72. Iran reportedly discussing purchase of Russian-made T-90s.
Surface Ships and Submarines	100+ (IRGC and regular Navy) Includes 4 Corvette and 10 China-supplied Houdong; 50+ IRGC-controlled patrol boats and small boats.) Three Kilo subs (reg. Navy controlled), and 14 North Korea-designed midget subs. Iran claimed on November 29, 2007, to have produced a new small sub equipped with sonar-evading technology, and it deployed four Iranian-made "Ghadir class" subs to the Red Sea in June 2011. Iran reportedly seeks to buy from Russia additional frigates and submarines. Iran has stockpiled a wide array of naval mines.
Naval Mines	About 3,000–5,000, including contact and influence mines
Combat Aircraft/Helicopters	330+ Includes 25 MiG-29 and 30 Su-24. Still dependent on U.S. F-4s, F-5s and F-14 bought during Shah's era. Iran reportedly negotiating with Russia to purchase Su-30s (Flanker) equipped with Yakhont air-to-air and air-to-ground missiles (Yakhont) as well as Mi-17 attack helicopters. Iran reportedly seeks to buy China-made J-10 combat aircraft.
Artillery and Artillery Rockets	Iran fields various fixed and towed artillery systems and multiple rocket launchers. Iran has developed "Explosively Formed Projectiles" (EFPs)—anti-tank rockets used to significant effect by pro-Iranian militias against U.S. forces in Iraq (2003-2011). Iran provides the weapon to other regional allies and proxies as well.
Air Defense	Iran fields various surface-to-air missile systems, including the Russian-made SA-14 (Gremlin) and SA-7 (Grail), as well as U.S.-made I-Hawks received from the 1986 "Iran-Contra" exchanges. Iran might also have some Stingers acquired in Afghanistan. Russia delivered to Iran (January 2007) 30 anti-aircraft missile systems (Tor M1), worth over \$1 billion. In December 2007, Russia agreed to sell five batteries of the S-300 air defense system at an estimated cost of \$800 million. Sale of the system did not technically violate U.N. Resolution 1929, but Russia refused to deliver the system until Iran agreed to the April 2, 2015, framework nuclear accord. Iran reportedly seeks to buy Russia's S-400 anti-aircraft system and Bastion coastal defense system.
Drones	Ababil, Shahed (some in strike roles), Mohajer (some in strike role); Toufan (attack); Foutros (some in strike role); Fotros, Karrar, Hemaseh, IRN-170.

Sources: IISS Military Balance (2019), DIA Annual Military Power of Iran, and various press reports.

Table 4. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)

The IRGC is generally aligned with Iran's political hardliners and is far more politically influential than is Iran's regular military. The IRGC's political influence depends in part on the regime's reliance on it to suppress dissent. A Rand Corporation study cited below stated: "Founded by a decree from Ayatollah Khomeini shortly after the victory of the 1978-1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) has evolved well beyond its original foundations as an ideological guard for the nascent revolutionary regime.... The IRGC's presence is particularly powerful in Iran's highly factionalized political system, in which [many senior figures] hail from the ranks of the IRGC...." IRGC Commanders-in-Chief (Mohsen Reza'i – 1981-1997; Rahim Safavi – 1997-2007; Mohammad Ali Jafari – 2007-2019; and Hossein Salami – 2019- present) have been trusted advisers to the Supreme Leader and have been hardliners on foreign policy issues and political dissent.

- The IRGC is a military force, as discussed earlier, but it is also the key organization for maintaining internal security. The Basij militia, which reports to the IRGC commander in chief, operates from thousands of positions in Iran's institutions and is integrated at the provincial level with the IRGC's provincial units.
- Through its Qods (Jerusalem) Force (QF), the IRGC has a foreign policy role by providing arms, funds, and advice to a wide range of regional pro-Iranian movements and leaders, including Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, several Persian Gulf monarchy states, Yemen, Gaza/West Bank, and Afghanistan. As far as Iranian terrorist operations outside the region, the IRGC-QF allegedly helped Lebanese Hezbollah to bomb Israeli and Jewish targets in Buenos Aires (1992 and 1994) and later recruited Saudi Hezbollah activists to bomb Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia in June 1996.
- Numerous IRGC and affiliated entities, including the IRGC itself and the QF, have been designated for U.S. sanctions as proliferation, terrorism supporting, and human rights abusing entities. The United States did not remove any IRGC-related designations under the JCPOA, but the EU plans to do so in 2023. On April 15, 2019, the Trump Administration designated the IRGC as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). See CRS Insight IN11093, *Iran's Revolutionary Guard Named a Terrorist Organization*, by Kenneth Katzman.
- The IRGC is also increasingly involved in Iran's economy, acting through a network of contracting businesses it has set up, most notably *Khatem ol-Anbiya* (Persian for "Seal of the Prophet", and also called Ghorb). Active duty IRGC senior commanders reportedly serve on Ghorb's board of directors and its chief executive, Rostam Ghasemi, served as Oil Minister during 2011-2013. In 2017, then-CIA Director Mike Pompeo estimated, as quoted in the Wall Street Journal cited below, in 2017 that the IRGC affiliates might control about 20% of Iran's overall economy, but estimates vary widely.

Sources: Frederic Wehrey et al., "The Rise of the Pasdaran," Rand Corporation, 2009; Katzman, Kenneth, "The Warriors of Islam: Iran's Revolutionary Guard," Westview Press, 1993; Defense Intelligence Agency, Military Power of Iran, 2019; Wall Street Journal, April 8, 2019.

Countering Iran

The Trump Administration articulated a strategy to try to deter Iran militarily and counter Iran's "malign activities" in the Middle East region, centered on imposing economic sanctions to limit the resources available to Iran as well as enhancing the U.S. military presence in the Gulf region.⁴⁶ The Trump Administration articulated 12 specific demands for Iran to change its behavior in exchange for a new JCPOA and normalized relations with the United States. Most of the demands pertain to Iran's regional activities.⁴⁷

- End support to Middle East terrorist groups, including Lebanese Hezbollah, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

⁴⁶ Secretary of State Michael Pompeo. The Restoration of Deterrence: The Iranian Example. January 13, 2020.

⁴⁷ Speech on Iran by Secretary of State Michael Pompeo. Heritage Foundation May 21, 2018.

- Respect the sovereignty of the Iraqi government and permit the disarming, demobilization, and reintegration of Shia militias.
- End military support to the Houthi militia and work toward a peaceful political settlement in Yemen.
- Withdraw all forces under Iranian command throughout the entirety of Syria.
- End support for the Taliban and other terrorists in Afghanistan and the region, and cease harboring senior al-Qaeda leaders.
- End the IRGC-QF's support for terrorists and militant partners around the world.
- End its threatening behavior against its neighbors, including threats to destroy Israel, firing of missiles into Saudi Arabia and the UAE, threats to international shipping. And ending its destructive cyberattacks.

The Administration sought to build alliances of countries inside and outside the region to counter Iran strategically. The United States worked bilaterally with regional leaders and factions that seek to counter Iranian influence. A regional concept centered on the six Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf—the “Middle East Strategic Alliance”—is discussed below. Building a broad international coalition to counter Iran was a key component of a ministerial meeting in Poland during February 13-14, 2019.⁴⁸ The Poland meeting has continued as a “Warsaw Process” to counter Iran through working groups on maritime security, cybersecurity, and counterterrorism. The Administration also has assembled a multilateral coalition, coordinated by U.S. forces in the Gulf, that monitors Iranian naval movements and presumably deters Iranian attacks.⁴⁹ The mission was formally inaugurated in November 2019 in Bahrain.⁵⁰ In the fall of 2020, the Trump Administration also brokered normalization agreements between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain that were intended, at least in part to counter Iran. The Administration also supported the sale of the F-35 combat aircraft to the UAE as an apparent part of the Israel-UAE normalization.⁵¹

Threatening Military Action

Trump Administration officials, including President Trump, as recently as early January 2021, have threatened military retaliation for further attacks on U.S. personnel or facilities by Iran or by Iran-backed factions. The Administration has attacked Iran-backed forces in retaliation for attacks that killed U.S. personnel and to prevent further such attacks, while seeming to refrain from military attacks that do not harm U.S. personnel or facilities.⁵² In January 2020, the Administration, following Iran-backed attacks on the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, undertook an airstrike that killed IRGC-QF commander Qasem Soleimani and his Iraqi ally Abu Mahdi Muhandis, and a reported simultaneous unsuccessful attack on the top IRGC-QF operative in Yemen (Abdul Reza Shahlai).⁵³

⁴⁸ “Pompeo Announces International Summit on Iran.” Fox News, January 11, 2019; CRS In Focus IF11132, *Coalition-Building Against Iran*, by Kenneth Katzman.

⁴⁹ Exclusive: U.S. Gulf maritime proposal not military coalition against Iran—Pentagon official. Reuters, July 18, 2019.

⁵⁰ For information on the IMSC, see CRS Report R45795, *U.S.-Iran Conflict and Implications for U.S. Policy*, by Kenneth Katzman, Kathleen J. McInnis, and Clayton Thomas.

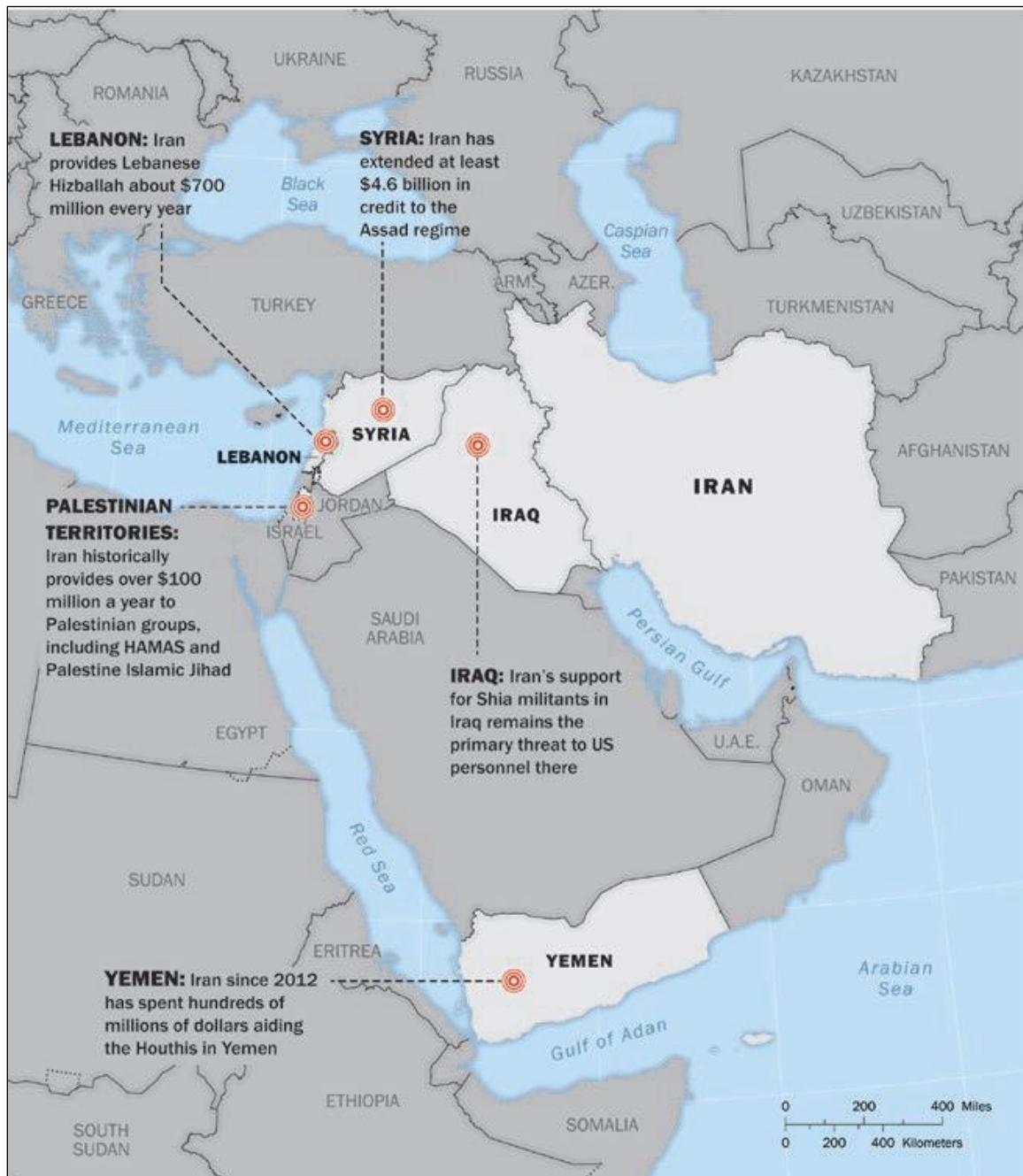
⁵¹ See CRS Report R46580, *Israel's Qualitative Military Edge and Possible U.S. Arms Sales to the United Arab Emirates*, coordinated by Jeremy M. Sharp and Jim Zanotti.

⁵² Department of Defense. U.S. Strikes 5 Kata'ib Hezbollah Targets in Iraq. March 13, 2020.

⁵³ On the day U.S. forces killed Soleimani, they targeted a senior Iranian official in Yemen. Washington Post, January 10, 2020.

Amid what appeared to be burgeoning U.S.-Iran escalation, the FY2020 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 116-92) was enacted, containing a provision requiring the Administration to provide information on efforts to deconflict with Iranian forces.

Figure 1. Iran's Regional Activities



Source and Note: Graphic contained in: State Department: "Outlaw Regime: Iran's Destructive Activities." 2020. Released September 19, 2020. According to that report, which cites outside estimates and does not detail how the cited figures were derived. Since 2012, Iran has spent over \$16 billion propping up the Assad regime and supporting its other partners and proxies in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.

Near East Region

In the Near East, Iran seeks to exert influence within several countries of the region in order to secure its national security and promote its ideology. Iran appears to be using its influence in the region, in part, as a tool to counter the U.S. policy of maximum pressure on Iran. Its primary strategy in the region is to deploy the IRGC-QF to arm, advise, and support allied governments and armed factions in what successive U.S. administrations have called “malign activities.” The State Department’s report “Outlaw Regime: A Chronicle of Iran’s Destructive Activities,” issued in 2018 and updated in 2020, asserts that Iran has spent over \$16 billion since 2012 “propping up the Assad regime and supporting [Iran’s] other partners and proxies in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.” But, estimates vary widely and are difficult to corroborate. The FY2020 National Defense Authorization Act (S. 1790, P.L. 116-92) required a Director of National Intelligence report to Congress on Iran’s funding for regional armed factions and terrorist groups, Iran’s support to proxy forces in Syria and Lebanon, and the threat posed to Israel by Iran and its proxies.

The Persian Gulf

Iran claims to be a Persian Gulf power with an 1,100-mile coastline on the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman. Exerting dominance over the Gulf has always been a key focus of Iran’s foreign policy, including during the reign of the Shah. In 1981, citing a perceived threat from revolutionary Iran and spillover from the Iran-Iraq War that began in September 1980, six Gulf states—Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates—formed the Gulf Cooperation Council alliance (GCC). U.S.-GCC security cooperation expanded throughout the remainder of the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War. After the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the defense cooperation became formalized as official agreements between the United States and several of the Gulf states. Prior to 2003, the extensive U.S. presence in the Gulf was in large part to contain Saddam Hussein’s Iraq but, with Iraq militarily weak since Saddam’s ouster, the U.S. military presence in the Gulf focuses primarily on containing Iran.

Several of the GCC states, particularly Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain, have been consistently critical of Iran for attempting to destabilize the region and fomenting unrest among Shia communities in the GCC states. Yet, all the GCC states maintain relatively normal trading relations with Iran. In a possible effort to ease renewed U.S.-Iran and Gulf-Iran tensions since mid-2019, the UAE and Saudi Arabia have conducted direct or sought indirect contact with Iran aimed at de-escalation.⁵⁴

Figure 2. Map of Near East



Source: Created by CRS.

⁵⁴ Consistent engagement of Iran by Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman arguably contributed to a rift within the GCC in June 2017. See CRS Report R44533, *Qatar: Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy*, by Kenneth Katzman.

Saudi Arabia⁵⁵

Iranian and Saudi leaders accuse each other of seeking regional hegemony, and their mutual animosity has aggravated regional sectarian tensions.⁵⁶ In 2015, Saudi Arabia led a coalition to intervene in Yemen against Houthi rebels that ousted the Republic of Yemen Government from Sanaa. Saudi Arabia, U.S. officials and a U.N. “panel of experts” on the Yemen conflict, have all presented findings that Iran is providing weapons and advice to the Houthis. Saudi leaders publicly applauded the Trump Administration’s May 2018 exit from the JCPOA and its efforts to pressure Iran economically and deter it militarily. In late 2019, the Kingdom reportedly sought indirect talks with Iran in an effort to ease tensions.⁵⁷

In January 2016, Saudi Arabia severed diplomatic relations with Iran in the wake of violent attacks and vandalism against its embassy in Tehran and consulate in Mashhad, Iran. The attacks were a reaction to Saudi Arabia’s January 2, 2016, execution of a dissident Shia cleric, Nimr Baqr al Nimr, alongside dozens of Al Qaeda members; all had been convicted of treason and/or terrorism charges. With the exception of Oman, the other GCC states followed suit in breaking diplomatic relations with or recalling their ambassadors from Iran.

Saudi officials repeatedly cite past Iran-inspired actions as a reason for distrusting Iran. These actions include Iran’s encouragement of violent demonstrations at some Hajj pilgrimages in Mecca in the 1980s and 1990s, which caused a break in relations from 1987 to 1991. The two countries increased mutual criticism of each other’s actions in the context of the 2016 Hajj. Saudi Arabia asserts that Iran instigated the June 1996 Khobar Towers bombing.⁵⁸

United Arab Emirates (UAE)⁵⁹

The UAE has been closely aligned with Saudi Arabia on virtually all Iran-related issues. However, the international and U.S. criticism of the Saudi and UAE campaign in Yemen contributed to the UAE decision in July 2019 to draw down its ground forces involved in combat in Yemen and, subsequently, to discuss maritime security with Iran in August 2019—the first security-related talks between the two countries since 2013.⁶⁰ The UAE decision to normalize relations with Israel in late 2020 was motivated, in large part, by concerns about Iranian regional influence and its intentions. Despite their differences, the UAE and Iran maintain extensive trade and commercial ties, and some UAE companies have been sanctioned by the United States for illicit trading in Iranian oil and petrochemical products. Iranian-origin residents of Dubai emirate number about 300,000, and many Iranian-owned businesses are located there.

The UAE is alone in the GCC in having a long-standing territorial dispute with Iran, concerning the Persian Gulf islands of Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunb islands. The Tunbs were seized by the Shah of Iran in 1971, and the Islamic Republic took full control of Abu Musa in 1992, violating a 1971 agreement to share control of that island. The UAE has sought to refer the dispute to the International Court of Justice (ICJ), but Iran insists on resolving the issue

⁵⁵ For detailed information on Saudi Arabia’s policy toward Iran, see CRS Report RL33533, *Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Christopher M. Blanchard.

⁵⁶ Statement for the Record. U.S. Director for National Intelligence James Clapper. Senate Armed Services Committee, February 2015, p. 14.

⁵⁷ “Saudi Arabia and Iran Make Quiet Openings to Head Off War.” New York Times, October 4, 2019.

⁵⁸ “Suspect arrested in 1996 Saudi bombing that killed 19 US airmen.” AFP, August 26, 2015.

⁵⁹ See CRS Report RS21852, *The United Arab Emirates (UAE): Issues for U.S. Policy*, by Kenneth Katzman.

⁶⁰ Rivals Iran and UAE to hold maritime security talks. Reuters, July 30, 2019

bilaterally. (ICJ referral requires concurrence from both parties to a dispute.) In 2013-2014, the two countries held productive talks on the issue, but no further progress has been reported.⁶¹

Qatar⁶²

Qatar's leaders advocate engagement with Iran and de-escalation of U.S.-Iran tensions. This position was in evidence during a January 2020 visit to Iran by Qatar's Amir Tamim Al Thani. Still, Qatar provided arms and funds to factions in Syria opposed to key Iranian ally Syrian President Bashar Al Asad and—until the 2017 intra-GCC rift, Qatar was assisting Saudi Arabia during the Saudi-led engagement in the Yemen conflict. Qatar, which withdrew its Ambassador from Iran in connection with the Nimr execution discussed above, restored relations in August 2017 to reciprocate Iran's support for Qatar in the intra-GCC rift. Iran's support has included food exports to Qatar to substitute for supplies from Saudi Arabia. Qatar has sometimes used its engagement with Iran to obtain the release of prisoners held by Iran or its allies.

Qatar does not have territorial disputes with Iran. However, Qatari officials reportedly remain wary that Iran could try to encroach on the large natural gas field Qatar shares with Iran (called North Field by Qatar and South Pars by Iran).

Bahrain⁶³

Bahrain, ruled by the Sunni Al Khalifa family and still unsettled by 2011 unrest among its majority Shia population, consistently alleges that Iran wants to overturn Bahrain's power structure. Bahrain has consistently accused Iran of supporting violent Shia factions that reportedly operate separately from an opposition dominated by peaceful political societies. On several occasions over the past few decades, Bahrain has withdrawn its Ambassador from Iran following Iranian criticism of Bahrain's treatment of its Shia population or alleged Iran-backed anti-government plots. In 1981 and again in 1996, Bahrain publicly claimed to have thwarted Iran-backed efforts by Bahraini Shia dissidents to violently overthrow the ruling family. Bahrain last broke ties with Iran in concert with Saudi Arabia in January 2016. Bahrain supported the Trump Administration's withdrawal from JCPOA. As did the UAE, Bahrain agreed to normalize relations with Israel in part to counter Iranian influence in the region.

Bahraini and U.S. officials assert that Iran currently provides weapons, explosives, and weapons-making equipment efforts to violent underground factions in Bahrain. In 2016, Bahraini authorities uncovered a large warehouse containing equipment, apparently supplied by Iran, that is tailored for constructing “explosively forced projectiles” (EFPs) such as those Iran-backed Shia militias used against U.S. armor in Iraq during 2004-2011.⁶⁴ On March 17, 2017, the State Department named two members of a Bahrain militant group, the Al Ashtar Brigades, as Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs), asserting the group is funded and supported by Iran.⁶⁵ In July 2018, the State Department named the Al Ashtar Brigades as an FTO. In December 2020, the State Department also named another Iran-backed underground group, the Mukhtar Brigades, as an FTO.

⁶¹ Iran, UAE said making deal over three islands. *Iran Times*, January 24, 2014.

⁶² See CRS Report R44533, *Qatar: Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy*, by Kenneth Katzman.

⁶³ See CRS Report 95-1013, *Bahrain: Unrest, Security, and U.S. Policy*, by Kenneth Katzman.

⁶⁴ Souad Mekhennet and Joby Warrick. “In Bahrain’s Militant Cells, U.S. Sees Iran.” *Washington Post*, April 2, 2017.

⁶⁵ State Department Terrorist Designations of Ahmad Hasan Yusuf and Alsayed Murtadha Majeed Ramadhan Alawi. March 17, 2017.

Kuwait⁶⁶

An advocate of engagement with Tehran, Kuwait exchanges leadership-level visits with Iran. Amir Sabah al-Ahmad Al Sabah visited Iran in June 2014, Kuwait's Foreign Minister visited Iran in late January 2017 to advance Iran-GCC reconciliation, and Rouhani visited Kuwait (and Oman) in February 2017 as part of that abortive effort. Kuwait recalled its Ambassador from Iran in connection with the Saudi-Iran Al Nimr dispute. Amir Sabah passed away in September 2020, but Kuwait's position on Iran under his successor, Nawwaf al-Ahmad al-Jabir Al Sabah, is expected to remain the same. Despite efforts to engage with Iran's leadership, Kuwait cooperates with U.S.-led efforts to contain Iranian power and is participating in Saudi-led military action against Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen.

Kuwait is differentiated from some of the other GCC states by its close integration of Shias into the political process and the economy. About 25% of Kuwaitis are Shia Muslims, but Shias have not generally been restive there. Iran-backed terrorist attacks on Kuwaiti leaders and U.S. and French embassies there during the 1980s did not succeed in mobilizing Kuwaiti Shias to end Kuwait's support for the Iraqi war effort in the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). However, Kuwaiti security services have on numerous occasions arrested Kuwaitis on charges of spying for the IRGC-QF or Iranian intelligence.

Oman⁶⁷

Oman's leadership has engaged Iran's leadership more consistently than any of the Gulf states, and this stance has not changed since the January 2020 succession of the late Oman's Sultan Qaboos bin Sa'id Al Said by his cousin, Haythim bin Tariq Al Said. Omani leaders continue to cite favorably the Shah's sending of troops to help the Sultan suppress rebellion in the Dhofar region in the 1970s, even though Iran's regime changed since then.⁶⁸ President Rouhani visited Oman in 2014 and in 2017 and Sultan Qaboos visited Iran in August 2013, reportedly to explore with the newly elected Rouhani U.S.-Iran nuclear negotiations that ultimately led to the JCPOA. After the JCPOA was finalized, Iran and Oman accelerated their joint development of the Omani port of Al Duqm. Since late 2016, Oman also has been a repository of Iranian heavy water to help Iran comply with the JCPOA, but the May 2, 2019, U.S. ending of waivers for storing Iranian heavy water curtailed this storage.

Oman was the only GCC country to not downgrade its relations with Iran in connection with the January 2016 Nimr dispute. Oman has not supported any factions fighting the Asad regime in Syria and has not joined the Saudi-led Arab intervention in Yemen, enabling Oman to undertake the role of mediator in both of those conflicts. Omani officials say that they are succeeding in blocking Iran from smuggling weaponry to the Houthis via Oman.⁶⁹

Iranian Threats to Gulf Security

Successive U.S. Administrations have considered the Gulf countries as lynchpins in U.S. strategy to contain Iranian power and to preserve the free flow of oil and freedom of navigation in the

⁶⁶ See CRS Report RS21513, *Kuwait: Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy*, by Kenneth Katzman.

⁶⁷ See CRS Report RS21534, *Oman: Politics, Security, and U.S. Policy*, by Kenneth Katzman.

⁶⁸ As reported in author conversations in Oman and with Omani officials, 1988-2015.

⁶⁹ See, for example, S/2018/68, Final report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen, January 26, 2018.

Persian Gulf. About 20% of worldwide traded oil flows through the Strait of Hormuz, the main Gulf chokepoint.⁷⁰

For several decades, U.S. and GCC officials have viewed Iran as a threat to the Strait and the Gulf. In mid-2015, Iran stopped several commercial ships transiting the Strait. During 2016-2017, IRGC Navy elements conducted numerous “high speed intercepts” of U.S. naval vessels in the Gulf and, in some cases, fired rockets near U.S. warships. During some of these incidents, U.S. vessels fired warning shots at Iranian naval craft. U.S.-Iran tensions in the Gulf have been elevated since the Trump Administration ended sanctions exceptions for the purchase of Iranian oil in May 2019. Iran attacked several Saudi, UAE and other tankers in the Gulf at that time, as well as conducted a major missile strike on Saudi critical energy infrastructure in September 2019. In April 2020, IRGC Navy boats approached U.S. Navy ships off Kuwait, leading to an instruction by President Trump to use deadly force if the IRGC Navy harasses U.S. ships again. U.S. defense officials said on April 22, 2020 that the President’s instruction constituted a warning to the Iranians and that U.S. commanders have discretion on how to respond to future such threats to U.S. ships.⁷¹ In December 2020, the Trump Administration deployed additional naval and other military assets to the Gulf, including a nuclear submarine, in anticipation of possible Iranian provocations in the runup to the first anniversary of the January 3, 2020 U.S. strike that killed IRGC-QF commander Qasem Soleimani.

U.S.-GCC Defense Cooperation Agreements

Since the early 1990s, the United States has sought to institutionalize and structure U.S.-GCC defense cooperation, including through bilateral defense pacts. In 2012, the Obama Administration instituted a “U.S.-GCC Strategic Dialogue,” and bilateral “strategic dialogues” are in place with Kuwait, the UAE, and Qatar. However, no formal U.S. commitment to defend any Gulf state appears to be in place.

The JCPOA prompted reported GCC concerns that the United States might reduce its commitment to Gulf security. President Obama sought to address those concerns in two summits with GCC leaders (May 2015 and April 2016) that produced announcements of a U.S.-GCC strategic partnership and specific U.S. commitments. Among those commitments were to: (1) facilitate U.S. arms transfers to the GCC states; (2) increase U.S.-GCC cooperation on maritime security, cybersecurity, and counterterrorism; (3) organize additional large-scale joint military exercises and U.S. training; and (4) implement a Gulf-wide coordinated ballistic missile defense capability, which the United States has sought to promote in recent years.⁷²

*Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA).*⁷³ Returning to a policy of trying to isolate Iran, the Trump Administration envisioned a new coalition to counter Iran, composed of the GCC states plus Egypt, Jordan, and possibly also Morocco. The Administration reportedly sought to unveil this “Middle East Strategic Alliance” (MESA) in advance of another U.S.-GCC summit but, because of the ongoing intra-GCC dispute and other factors, the meeting has not been held to date.⁷⁴ The MESA concept suffered a setback in April 2019 when Egypt announced that it would not participate in the grouping. The Administration held a series of MESA-related meetings with

⁷⁰ The Strait of Hormuz is the world's most important oil transit chokepoint. Energy Information Administration. June 20, 2019.

⁷¹ Dept. of Defense. Defense Officials Express Agreement With President's Warning to Iran. April 22, 2020.

⁷² White House. U.S.- Gulf Cooperation Council Camp David Joint Statement. May 14, 2015.

⁷³ For analysis on the MESA and other cooperative structures, see CRS In Focus IF11173, *Cooperative Security in the Middle East: History and Prospects*, by Clayton Thomas.

⁷⁴ Jack Detsch. “Trump Shelves Gulf Talks until Next Year.” Al Monitor, September 6, 2018.

visiting GCC officials on the concept in the wake of the September 14, 2019, attacks on Saudi Arabia, but the pact has not been announced, to date. The late 2020 agreement of the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco to normalize relations with Israel could have constituted an alternative to the MESA concept, insofar as the UAE and Bahrain normalization decisions were related, at least in part, to countering Iran.

Bilateral U.S.-Gulf Defense Agreements and U.S. Forces in the Gulf.

The GCC states are pivotal to U.S. efforts to counter Iran militarily. Most of the approximately 60,000 U.S. forces in the Gulf region are deployed to Gulf state military facilities in accordance with formal defense cooperation agreements (DCAs) with Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE; a facilities access agreement with Oman; and memoranda of understanding with Saudi Arabia.⁷⁵ The DCAs and other defense agreements reportedly provide for the United States to pre-position substantial military equipment, to train the GCC countries' forces; to sell arms to those states; and, in some cases, to hold consultations in the event of a major threat to the state in question.⁷⁶ Some U.S. forces in the Gulf are aboard a U.S. aircraft carrier task force that is in or near the Gulf region frequently. The Defense Department also uses authority in Section 2282 of U.S.C. Title 10 to program Counterterrorism Partnerships Funds (CTPF) for U.S. special operations forces training to enhance GCC counterterrorism capabilities, including against the IRGC-QF.

*Arms Sales.*⁷⁷ U.S. arms sales to the GCC countries have improved GCC air and naval capabilities to counter Iran and other threats. In past years, the United States has tended to approve virtually all arms purchase requests by the GCC states, including such equipment as combat aircraft, precision-guided munitions, combat ships, radar systems, and communications gear.

The following sections discuss specific U.S.-Gulf defense relationships.⁷⁸

- *Saudi Arabia.* The United States and Saudi Arabia have signed successive memoranda of understanding (MoUs) under which U.S. military personnel train the military, National Guard (SANG), and Ministry of Interior forces in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi force fields about 200 U.S.-made M1A2 "Abrams" tanks and its air force flies the F-15. In 2018, Saudi Arabia announced it would buy the sophisticated missile defense system Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system (THAAD) at an estimated cost of about \$14 billion. In 2019, in the context of escalating tensions with Iran, the Administration cited emergency authority to make additional sales to Saudi Arabia and deployed several thousand U.S. forces to Prince Sultan Air Base south of Riyadh, which had not been used by U.S. forces since 2003.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Figures provided to CRS by U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), January 2020.

⁷⁶ The texts of the DCAs and related agreements are classified, but general information on the provisions of the agreements has been provided in some open sources, including: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Military Presence in the Gulf: Challenges and Prospects S. 2012, by Sami Hajjar. Section 1234 of the FY2016 NDAA (P.L. 114-92) required a report within 120 days of enactment (by March 30, 2016) on any U.S. security commitments to Middle Eastern countries, including the GCC, and the U.S. force posture required for those commitments.

⁷⁷ See CRS Report R44984, *Arms Sales in the Middle East: Trends and Analytical Perspectives for U.S. Policy*, coordinated by Clayton Thomas; and CRS Report R46580, *Israel's Qualitative Military Edge and Possible U.S. Arms Sales to the United Arab Emirates*, coordinated by Jeremy M. Sharp and Jim Zanotti.

⁷⁸ The U.S. deployments in the Gulf are discussed in greater detail in CRS reports on the individual GCC states. Numbers of U.S. troops in each Gulf state were provided by U.S. Central Command in January 2020.

⁷⁹ See CRS Insight IN11127, *U.S. Arms Sales to the Middle East: Trump Administration Uses Emergency Exception in the Arms Export Control Act*, coordinated by Jeremy M. Sharp.

- *Kuwait.* The United States has had a DCA with Kuwait since 1991, and about 14,000 mostly U.S. Army personnel are stationed there, including ground combat troops. U.S. forces operate from such facilities as Camp Arifjan, south of Kuwait City, where the United States pre-positions ground armor including Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles, as well as from several Kuwaiti air bases. U.S. forces train at Camp Buehring, about 50 miles west of the capital. Kuwait has a small force—about 15,000 active military personnel—that relies on U.S. arms, including Abrams tanks and F/A-18 combat aircraft.
- *Qatar.* The United States has had a DCA with Qatar since 1992, which was revised in December 2013. Over 11,000 U.S. and coalition military personnel, mostly Air Force, are in Qatar, stationed at the large Al Udeid Air Base, which houses the forward headquarters of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), and the Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC) that oversees U.S. combat aircraft missions in the region. Some U.S. Army forces are deployed at the *As Saliyah* army pre-positioning site where U.S. armor is pre-positioned.⁸⁰ Qatar's armed force is small with about 12,000 active military personnel. Qatar has historically relied on French military equipment, including Mirage combat aircraft, but in 2016, the Obama Administration approved selling up to 72 F-15s to Qatar. The F-15 deal, with an estimated value of \$21 billion, was formally signed between Qatar and the Trump Administration in June 2017.
- *UAE.* The United States has had a DCA with UAE nearly continuously since 1994, and the United States and the UAE announced the entry into force of a revised DCA in May 2019.⁸¹ About 3,500 U.S. forces, mostly Air Force and Navy, are stationed in UAE, operating surveillance and refueling aircraft from Al Dhafra Air Base, and servicing U.S. Navy ships at the commercial port of Jebel Ali.⁸² The UAE armed forces include about 63,000 active duty personnel, using primarily French-made tanks purchased in the 1990s. Its air force is equipped with U.S.-made F-16s, and the UAE has stated since 2010 that it wants to buy the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter—some of which deployed to the UAE in June 2019—but U.S. officials have long indicated that the potential sale would be evaluated in accordance with U.S. policy to maintain Israel's Qualitative Military Edge (QME). In November 2020, several months after Israel and the UAE announced an agreement to normalize their relations, the Trump Administration notified Congress of its intent to sell the UAE up to 50 F-35s, along with \$10 billion in munitions. The UAE has taken delivery of the THAAD anti-missile system.
- *Bahrain.* The United States has had a DCA with Bahrain since 1991. About 5,000 U.S. personnel, mostly Navy, operate out of the large Naval Support Activity facility that houses the U.S. command structure for U.S. naval operations in the Gulf. U.S. Air Force personnel also access Shaykh Isa Air Base. Bahrain has only about 6,000 active military personnel, and another 11,000 internal security forces. The United States has given Bahrain older model U.S. M60A3 tanks and a frigate ship as grant “excess defense articles,” and the country has bought U.S.-

⁸⁰ Department of Defense press release, January 14, 2019. <https://dod.defense.gov/News/News-Releases/News-Release-View/Article/1731648/us-and-qatar-sign-mou-reaffirming-qatars-commitment-to-supporting-us-military-a/>.

⁸¹ White House press release, at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/joint-statement-u-s-national-security-advisor-ambassador-john-bolton-uae-national-security-advisor-sheikh-tahnoon-bin-zayed-al-nahyan/>.

⁸² Department of State. U.S. Security Cooperation With the United Arab Emirates. November 3, 2020.

made F-16s with national funds and U.S. Foreign Military Financing (FMF) credit. The Obama Administration told Congress in 2016 that it would not finalize a sale of additional F-16s unless the government demonstrates progress on human rights issues, but the Trump Administration dropped that condition.⁸³

- *Oman.* The United States has had a “facilities access agreement” with Oman since April 1980, under about 50 U.S. forces (mostly Air Force) are deployed at and have access to Omani air bases such as those at Seeb, Masirah Island, Thumrait, and Musnanah. Oman has a 25,000-person force that has historically relied on British-made military equipment. The United States has provided some M60A3 tanks as excess defense articles, and Oman has bought F-16s using national funds, partly offset by U.S. FMF.
- *Assistance Issues.* The GCC states are considered wealthy states and most receive little U.S. assistance. The more wealthy GCC states (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, and UAE) sometimes receive nominal amounts of U.S. funding to enable them to obtain discounted prices to enroll personnel in military education courses in the United States. Several of the Gulf states have, in recent years, received amounts in the low million dollars per year in Foreign Military Financing (FMF), International Military Education and Training Funds (IMET), and Nonproliferation, Antiterrorism, Demining and Related (NADR) funds for counterterrorism, counter-narcotics, and border and maritime security programs.

⁸³ Trump administration to allow Bahrain F-16 deal. Defense News, March 30, 2017.

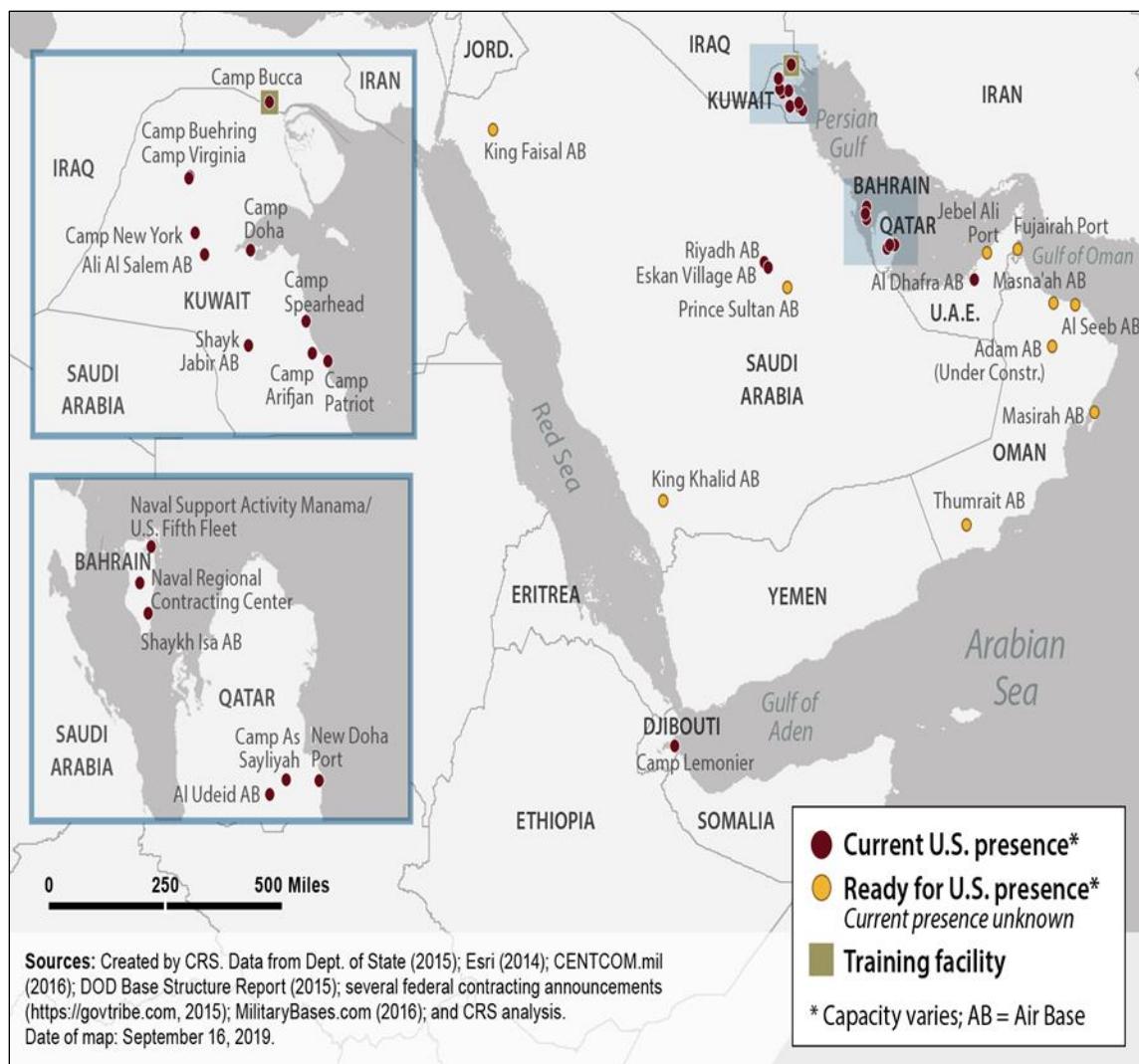
Figure 3. U.S. CENTCOM Regional Presence

Table 5. Military Assets of the Gulf Cooperation Council Member States

	Bahrain	Kuwait	Oman	Qatar	Saudi Arabia	UAE
Total Manpower	8,200+	17,500	42,600	16,500	225,000+	63,000
ARMY & NATIONAL GUARD						
Personnel	6,000	11,000	25,000	8,500	175,000	44,400
Main Battle Tanks	180	293	154	39	600	467
AIFV/APC	225	789	206	230	3,011	1,957
Artillery	151	218	233	91+	771	579+
Attack Helicopters	—	—	—	—	15	—
SAMs	91	136+	48	75	1,805	N/A
NAVY						
Personnel	700	2,000	4,200	1,800	13,500	2,500
Destroyers /Frigates	1	—	3	—	7	—
Submarines	—	—	2	—	—	10
Patrol/Coastal Combatants	64	52	46	23	83	141
Amphibious Landing Craft	1	4	—	—	8	—
AIR FORCE						
Personnel (Air Defense)	1,500	2,500	5,000	1,500	20,000 (16,000)	4,500
Fighter Aircraft	33	39	15	12	261	138
Attack Helicopters	28	16	—	8	—	37
MISSILE DEFENSE						
Patriot PAC-2	Yes	Yes	—	Yes	Yes	Yes
Patriot PAC-3	Yes	Yes	—	Yes	Yes	Yes
THAAD	—	—	Considering	Considering	Sale approved	Delivered

Sources: The Military Balance, 2020, published by the International Institute for Strategic Studies, and various press.

Notes: AIFV = Armored Infantry Fighting Vehicle, APC = Armored Personnel Carrier, SAM = Surface-to-Air Missile, THAAD = Terminal High Altitude Area Defense.

Iranian Policy on Iraq, Syria, and the Islamic State⁸⁴

Iran's policy has been to support the governments in Iraq and Syria against armed insurgencies or other domestic threats, while building influence over the governments in both countries.

Iraq⁸⁵

Iran has sought to exert influence in Iraq and try to reduce the influence of the United States there. Iran seeks to shape Iraqi leadership choices, while increasing its leverage by building pro-Iranian militias into significant political movements and sources of armed strength. Iran also exercises "soft power" to try to build good relations with all segments of Iraq's population.

Iran has been able to exercise significant leverage in Iraq in large part because of the U.S. military ousting of Saddam Hussein in 2003, which produced governments led by Shia Islamists who have longstanding ties to Iran. The IRGC-QF arms, trains, and advises several Shia militias, some of which organized during Saddam Hussein's rule and others formed to fight U.S. forces in Iraq during 2003-2011.⁸⁶ During that latter period, Iran provided various militias with rocket-propelled munitions and other weaponry that contributed to the deaths of about over 600 U.S. military personnel.⁸⁷ Collectively, the Iran-backed militias and new recruits were incorporated into a broader Popular Mobilization Forces or Units (PMFs or PMUs) established in 2014 to fight alongside the Iraqi military against the challenge from the Islamic State organization. Iran's advice and support to Iraqi Shia militias subsequently contributed to Iraq's becoming an arena for U.S.-Iran hostilities in late 2019 and throughout much of 2020.⁸⁸

Iranian leaders also have reportedly sought to determine key leadership choices in Iraq. Some of the militia commanders Iran supports lead significant political movements that have won significant numbers of seats in Iraq's Council of Representatives. In April 2020, Iran has sought to play a role in who is selected as Iraq's next Prime Minister following the resignation in December 2019 of Adel Abdul Mahdi.⁸⁹

Iran also exercises soft power in Iraq. It is the main supplier of natural gas that Iraq needs to operate its electricity plants. In March 2019, Iran's President Hassan Rouhani conducted an official visit to Iraq, and he met in Najaf with the revered Iraqi Shia leader Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. On the other hand, Iran-Iraq trade relations have declined significantly since Iraq closed the border with Iran on March 8, 2020 to try to prevent the spread of COVID-19, which has afflicted Iran more than any other Middle Eastern country.⁹⁰

Despite good relations with the Iraqi Kurdish political leadership, Iran supports the territorial integrity of Iraq, as does the United States. Iran opposed the Kurdish region's holding of a September 2017 referendum on independence. At the same time, Iran has acted against some anti-Iran government Kurdish movements operating in northern Iraq. In September 2018, Iran fired

⁸⁴ See CRS Report R43612, *The Islamic State and U.S. Policy*, by Christopher M. Blanchard and Carla E. Humud.

⁸⁵ See CRS Report R45633, *Iraq: Issues in the 116th Congress*, by Christopher M. Blanchard, and CRS In Focus IF10404, *Iraq and U.S. Policy*, by Christopher M. Blanchard.

⁸⁶ See State Department Country Reports on Terrorism. 2018.

⁸⁷ U.S. State Department Iran officials press briefing. April 2019.

⁸⁸ CRS Report R45795, *U.S.-Iran Conflict and Implications for U.S. Policy*, by Kenneth Katzman, Kathleen J. McInnis, and Clayton Thomas.

⁸⁹ Iraqi PM-designate may be on futile mission to win Iranian support. Al Monitor, April 1, 2020.

⁹⁰ Iraq Resists Iran's Push to Reopen their Border. New York Times, April 22, 2020.

Fateh-110 short-range ballistic missiles at a base in northern Iraq operated by the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDP-I)—an Iranian Kurdish opposition group.

Iranian Advice and Funding to Iraqi Militias

Several powerful Iran-backed militias, particularly Asa’ib Ahl Al Haq (AAH), the Badr Organization, Kata’ib Hezbollah, and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, have come to wield significant political influence. The leaders of these groups have close ties to Iran dating from their underground struggle against Saddam Hussein’s regime in the 1980s and 1990s, and they advocate reducing ties to the United States. The number of IRGC-QF personnel in Iraq advising Iran-backed militias or the Iraqi government is not known from published sources. Similarly, dollar figures for the level of Iranian support to Iraqi armed factions are difficult to identify. A brief outline of the major Iran-backed Iraqi militias is below:

- *Kata’ib Hezbollah (KAH)*. This group, an offshoot of the Mahdi Army militias formed by Shia cleric Moqtada Al Sadr in 2004, was designated by the State Department as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) in June 2009. In July 2009, the Department of the Treasury designated it and its then-commander, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, as threats to Iraqi stability under Executive Order 13438. Muhandis, who was killed in the same U.S. strike that killed Soleimani on January 3, 2020, was an activist in several Iran-backed Shia dissident organizations in the 1980s and 1990s, and was convicted in absentia by Kuwaiti courts for the Da’wa Party assassination attempt on the ruler of Kuwait in the group’s May 1985 and the 1983 bombings of the U.S. and French embassies there.⁹¹ U.S. officials have cited KAH as the main source of the militia attacks on Iraqi bases where U.S. forces operate that have occurred since mid-2019. On February 20, 2020, the State Dept. designated a KAH leader, Secretary-General Ahmad al-Hamadawi, as a terrorist, under Executive Order 13224.⁹²
- *Asa’ib Ahl Al Haq (AAH)*. Its leader Qais al-Kazali headed the Mahdi Army “Special Groups” breakaway faction during 2006-2007, until his capture by U.S. forces for his alleged role in a 2007 raid that killed five American soldiers. During his imprisonment, his followers formed AAH. After his release in 2010, Kazali took refuge in Iran, returning in 2011 to take resume command of AAH while also participating in the political process. Kazali, an elected member of Iraq’s CoR, was sanctioned under Executive Order 131224 in December 2019. AAH was named as an FTO in January 2020.⁹³
- *Badr Organization*. This group, originally the armed wing of the anti-Saddam Shia dissident group Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI, formerly SCIRI), did not oppose the 2003-2011 U.S. intervention in Iraq. The Badr forces (then known as the Badr Brigades or Badr Corps) received training and support from the IRGC-QF in failed efforts to overthrow Saddam Hussein’s regime during the 1980s and 1990s. Badr’s leader is Hadi al-Amiri, an elected member of the National Assembly, whose “Conquest” movement won the second-highest number of seats in the May 12, 2018, Iraqi CoR election. Neither Badr nor its leaders has been designated for any U.S. sanctions.

⁹¹ Who was Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis? Middle East Eye, January 3, 2020.

⁹² Department of State. State Department Terrorist Designation of Ahmad al-Hamidawi. February 26, 2020.

⁹³ U.S. Designates Iraqi Shi’ite Militia As Foreign Terrorist Organization. Radio Farda, January 4, 2020.

- *Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba.* This militia, led by Shaykh Akram al-Ka'bi, formed in 2013 to assist the Assad regime against armed rebel groups in Syria. Ka'bi was designated as a threat to Iraq's stability under E.O. 13438 in 2008, when he was then a leader of a Mahdi Army offshoot termed the "Special Groups." In March 2019, the Nujaba militia was designated as a terrorist entity under E.O. 13224.

U.S. Policy to Curb Iranian Influence in Iraq

U.S. policy to limit Iranian influence in Iraq has focused on engaging with Iraqi leaders and insisting that they incorporate armed factions into the national command structure including, if necessary, dismantling militias that insist on acting autonomously.⁹⁴ Since 2019, the United States has also acted militarily - at times without apparent coordination with Iraq's government - against Iran-backed militias to reduce their capabilities and deter further attacks.⁹⁵ However, the U.S. strikes have also caused the militias and their political leaders to press for the expulsion of U.S. forces from Iraq. Efforts by some Iraqi leaders, including Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, to rein in the Iran-backed militias have had mixed success. Continuing Iran-backed attacks on U.S. personnel and facilities in Iraq, including the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, might have contributed to the decision by the Trump Administration to halve the number of U.S. forces in Iraq to about 2,500 as of January 2021, and to reduce staff at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad. The diminishing U.S. presence in Iraq raises questions about the ongoing level of U.S. influence in Iraq relative to that of Iran.⁹⁶

The United States has pressed Iraq to establish sources of natural gas and electricity other than Iran. Iraqi leaders have resisted U.S. pressure to reduce economic ties with Iran, and the United States has provided successive waivers of the Iran Freedom and Counter-proliferation Act (P.L. 112-239) to permit Iraq to continue buying Iranian natural gas and electricity.⁹⁷

The FY2019 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA, P.L. 115-232), bans any U.S. assistance from being used to assist any group affiliated with the IRGC-QF. In the 116th Congress, legislation such as H.R. 361 and H.R. 571 was introduced that would have required U.S. sanctions on Iran-backed militias or other entities determined to be destabilizing Iraq.

Syria⁹⁸

Iranian leaders have undertaken major efforts to keep in power Syrian President Bashar al Asad, who is a key Iranian ally despite his secular ideology. Asad, whose family and close regime allies practice a version of Shiism: (1) facilitates Iran's arming and protection of Hezbollah; (2) is perhaps the only ally Iran has in the Arab world, and (3) might be replaced by a government hostile to Iran if his regime fell. Iran's strategic interest in the Asad regime's survival is sufficiently compelling that Iran will likely keep IRGC-QF advisors in Syria as long as any threat

⁹⁴ Iraqi Prime Minister Tries to Rein in Militias, and Their Grip on Economy. New York Times, July 1, 2019.

⁹⁵ Statement by the Department of Defense. March 12, 2020.

⁹⁶ U.S.-Led Forces Pull Out of Third Iraqi Base This Month. Associated Press, March 30, 2020.

⁹⁷ Iraq receives 90-day Iran sanctions waiver from outgoing U.S. administration. Iraq Oil Report, January 4, 2021.

⁹⁸ For more information, see CRS In Focus IF10858, *Iran and Israel: Tension Over Syria*, by Carla E. Humud, Kenneth Katzman, and Jim Zanotti, and CRS Report RL33487, *Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response*, coordinated by Carla E. Humud.

to Asad persists. Several high-ranking IRGC commanders have died in Syria.⁹⁹ Iran has been in partnership with Russian forces, which intervened in Syria on Asad's behalf in 2015.

Israeli leaders describe Iran's presence in Syria as adding to the threat posed by Lebanese Hezbollah on Israel's northern border. Israeli leaders accuse Iran of constructing bases in Syria, including rocket and missile factories that can safely supply Hezbollah.¹⁰⁰ Over the past several years, Israel has conducted periodic strikes on such targets in Syria.¹⁰¹

Iran has participated in multilateral diplomacy on a political solution in Syria and put forward proposals for a peaceful transition in Syria. In 2015, Iran participated in the international contact group on Syria, which included the United States. Iran was invited to participate in this "Vienna process" after the United States dropped its objections to Iran's participation as a consequence of Iran's agreement to the JCPOA. Russia's intervention in Syria enabled it to assemble a separate diplomatic process that includes Turkey as well as Iran ("Astana Process").

Iranian Military and Financial Support to Asad

Iranian support to the Asad regime has been extensive, including the provision of substantial funds, weapons, and IRGC-QF advisors to the Syrian regime. However, the magnitude of Iranian support is available only in broad ranges:

- *Iranian Military Personnel.* During 2013-2015, Iran expanded its intervention in Syria to as many as 2,000 Iranian military personnel in Syria, including IRGC-QF, IRGC ground force, and even some *Artesh* (Iran national military) personnel.¹⁰² The *Artesh* has not deployed beyond Iran's borders since the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War. The current number of Iranian forces in Syria is not known from open sources.
- *Hezbollah Fighters.* Sources converge on a figure of about 7,000 Lebanese Hezbollah fighters deployed to Syria to assist the Syrian military, at the height of the combat during 2013-2015. The current number of Hezbollah fighters in Syria has not been publicized.
- *Militia Recruits.* The IRGC-QF recruited other Shia fighters to operating under Iranian command in Syria at the height of the conflict during 2013-2017, with numbers ranging from 24,000-80,000.¹⁰³ These figures include not only Lebanese Hezbollah fighters but also Iraqi militias and brigades composed of Afghan and Pakistani Shias. These numbers apparently declined somewhat as the Syrian government regained territory; on November 29, 2018, the State Department's Special Representative for Iran, Brian Hook, stated that Iran "manages as many as 10,000 Shia fighters in Syria, some of whom are children as young as 12 years old."¹⁰⁴

⁹⁹ Pasdar Toll in Syria Heavier than all U.S. Deaths in Mideast. *Iran Times*, March 16, 2018.

¹⁰⁰ Iran building missile factories in Syria and Lebanon – Netanyahu. BBC, August 28, 2017.

¹⁰¹ See CRS In Focus IF10858, *Iran and Israel: Tension Over Syria*, by Carla E. Humud, Kenneth Katzman, and Jim Zanotti.

¹⁰² FY2016 DOD report on the military power of Iran, released January 2017 (unclassified summary).

¹⁰³ Department of State, Country Reports on Terrorism 2016. See also: Institute for the Study of War. "Iranian Strategy in Syria," by Will Fulton, Joseph Holliday, and Sam Wyer. May 2013.

¹⁰⁴ Special Briefing by Brian Hook, Advisor to the Secretary of State and Special Representative for Iran. November 29, 2018.

- *Financial Support.* Estimates of Iran's spending to support Asad's effort against the rebellion vary widely. Some estimates have been cited in the State Department's "Outlaw Regime" report, referenced above. The aid includes gratis oil and commodity transfers, munitions, and other military aid.

U.S. Policy to Limit Iranian Influence in Syria

U.S. officials have stated that reducing Iran's presence in Syria is critical to protecting Israel and to the larger U.S. strategy of rolling back Iran's regional influence. Secretary of State Pompeo said in his May 21, 2018, speech at the Heritage Foundation, that "Iran must withdraw all forces under Iranian command throughout the entirety of Syria."¹⁰⁵ U.S. forces in Syria have not been ordered to (and are not authorized by Congress to) pre-emptively attack Iranian or pro-Iranian forces in Syria, but Administration have publicly defended Israeli strikes on Iranian positions in Syria that are part of Israel's effort to deny Iran an extensive military infrastructure there.¹⁰⁶

Some U.S. sanctions specifically seek to limit Iran's influence in Syria. Executive Order 13572 blocks U.S.-based property and prevents U.S. visas for persons determined to be responsible for human rights abuses and repression of the Syrian people. Several IRGC-QF commanders have been designated for sanctions under that and other executive orders. In mid-2019, the United States imposed sanctions on Iranian ships and shipping facilitators involved in Iranian oil shipments to Syria. The Caesar Civilian Protection Act, signed into law as Title LXXIV of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020 on December 20, 2019 (P.L. 116-92), expanded the US sanctions regime against Syria to include persons who provide military assistance to Syria on behalf of Russia or Iran.

Hamas, Hezbollah, and other Anti-Israel Groups

Iran's leaders assert that Israel is an illegitimate creation of the West and an oppressor of the Palestinians—a position that differs from that of the Shah of Iran, whose government maintained relatively normal relations with Israel. Supreme Leader Khamene'i has repeatedly described Israel as a "cancerous tumor" that should be removed from the region. In a 2015 speech, Khamene'i stated that Israel will likely not exist in 25 years—the time frame for the last of the JCPOA nuclear restriction to expire.¹⁰⁷ Iran's leaders assert that the international community applies a "double standard" to Iran in that Israel has faced no sanctions even though it reportedly is the only Middle Eastern country to possess nuclear weapons and not to become a party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Iran's statements, and its actions against Israel discussed below, underpin assertions by some Israeli leaders, including Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, that a nuclear-armed Iran would be an "existential threat" to Israel.¹⁰⁸ Israel's Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu called the JCPOA a "historic mistake" and strongly supports continuing the Trump Administration's abrogation of the accord in favor of a "maximum pressure" strategy.

Iran materially supports many non-state actors that undertake armed action against Israel as a means of pressuring Israel to make political concessions on issues involving Iran, its allies, or the Palestinians, or perhaps to disrupt Israelis' prosperity, morale, and perceptions of security. For

¹⁰⁵ State Dept. "After the Deal: A New Iran Strategy." Secretary of State Mike Pompeo before the Heritage Foundation. May 21, 2018.

¹⁰⁶ U.S. voices support for Israel as war fears rise in the Middle East. Washington Post, August 29, 2019.

¹⁰⁷ Iran's supreme leader: There will be no such thing as Israel in 25 years. CNN, September 11, 2015.

¹⁰⁸ CRS Report RL33476, *Israel: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

more than two decades, the annual State Department report on international terrorism has stated that Iran provides funding, weapons (including advanced rockets), and training to a variety of U.S.-designated FTOs, including Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestine Islamic Jihad (PIJ), the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades (a militant offshoot of the dominant Palestinian faction Fatah), and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC).

Hamas¹⁰⁹

U.S. government reports, including the annual State Department report on international terrorism and the 2018 and 2020 “Outlaw Regime” reports referenced earlier, assert that Iran gives funds, weapons, and training to the Sunni Islamist militant group Hamas, which seized control of the Gaza Strip in 2007 and has administered that territory de-facto since. The Iran-Hamas relationship was forged in the 1990s as part of an apparent attempt to disrupt the Israeli-Palestinian peace process through Hamas attacks on civilian targets inside Israel. Hamas terrorist attacks within Israel have decreased since 2005, but Hamas has used Iran-supplied rockets and other weaponry during three significant conflicts with Israel since 2008, the latest of which was in 2014, and in smaller-scale rocket attacks since.

In 2012, differing positions between Iran and Hamas on the ongoing Syria conflict caused a rift. Largely out of sectarian sympathy with Sunni rebels in Syria, Hamas opposed the efforts by Asad to defeat the rebellion militarily. Owing to the rift, Iran’s support to Hamas in its brief 2014 conflict with Israel was less than in previous Hamas-Israel conflicts. Since then, Iran has rebuilt the relationship by providing missile technology that Hamas used to construct its own rockets and by helping it rebuild tunnels destroyed in the conflict with Israel.¹¹⁰ Hamas and Iran publicly restored their relations in August 2017. U.S. officials also assess that Hamas raises funds in Persian Gulf states.¹¹¹

Iranian Financial Support to Hamas

Iran’s financial support to Hamas has been, at times, perhaps as high as \$300 million per year.¹¹² The State Department’s September 2018 “Outlaw Regime” report, referenced earlier, stated that Iran “provides up to \$100 million annually in combined support to Palestinian terrorist groups,” including Hamas, PIJ, and the PFLP-GC.

Hezbollah

Lebanese Hezbollah is Iran’s most significant non-state ally. Hezbollah’s actions to support its own as well as Iranian interests take many forms, including acts of terrorism and training and combat in countries in the region.¹¹³ State Department reports on international terrorism have stated that “the group generally follows the religious guidance of the Iranian Supreme Leader, which [is] [Grand Ayatollah] Ali Khamenei.”¹¹⁴

Iran’s close relationship to the group began when Lebanese Shia clerics of the Lebanese Da’wa (Islamic Call) Party—many of whom had studied under the leader of Iran’s revolution, Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini—began to organize in 1982 into what later was unveiled in 1985 as

¹⁰⁹ See CRS Report RL34074, *The Palestinians: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

¹¹⁰ Stuart Winer. “Iran Boasts of Rocket Aid to Palestinians, Hezbollah.” *The Times of Israel*, February 3, 2015.

¹¹¹ State Department Country Reports on Terrorism: 2018.

¹¹² Robert Tait, “Iran Cuts Hamas Funding Over Syria.” *Telegraph*, May 31, 2013.

¹¹³ See Ben Hubbard. “Hezbollah Wields Rising Power as Iran’s Enforcer.” *New York Times*, August 28, 2017.

¹¹⁴ Department of State. Country Reports on Terrorism: 2016.

Hezbollah. IRGC forces were sent to Lebanon to help develop a military wing, and these IRGC forces subsequently evolved into the IRGC-QF.

Iranian leaders have long worked with Hezbollah as an instrument to pressure Israel. Hezbollah's attacks on Israeli forces in Israel's self-declared "security zone" in southern Lebanon contributed to an Israeli withdrawal from that territory in May 2000. During a two-month 2006 war with Israel, Hezbollah fired Iranian-supplied rockets on northern Israel and damaged an Israeli warship with a C-802 anti-ship missile of the type that Iran reportedly bought from China in the 1990s. Hezbollah's leadership asserted that it was victorious in that war for holding out against Israel.

Illustrating the degree to which Iranian assistance has helped Hezbollah become a potential global terrorism threat, annual State Department country reports on terrorism highlight the group's international operations, largely focused on Israeli and/or Jewish targets. Iran has assisted Hezbollah in several of the terrorist attacks that are depicted in the table above.

Hezbollah has become a major force in Lebanon's politics, in part due to the support it gets from Iran. Hezbollah, along with its political allies, now plays a significant role in decisionmaking and leadership selections in Lebanon. Hezbollah's allies increased their number of seats as a result of May 2018 parliamentary elections in Lebanon, although the number of seats held by Hezbollah itself stayed at 13. The group played a key role in selecting a new Prime Minister in late 2019, and it holds two seats in the current Lebanese cabinet. Hezbollah's militia rivals the effectiveness of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). However, there has been criticism of Hezbollah in and outside Lebanon for its intervention in Syria, which has embroiled it in war against other Muslims.

Iranian Financial and Military Support

Iranian support for Hezbollah fluctuates according to the scope and intensity of their joint activity. Iran provided high levels of aid to the group in the course of its combat intervention in Syria and after the 2006 Hezbollah war with Israel.¹¹⁵ Specific assistance has included

- *Training.* State Department reports on international terrorism assert that Iran "has trained thousands of [Hezbollah] fighters at camps in Iran." In the early 1980s, Iran was widely reported to have a few thousand IRGC personnel helping to establish what became Hezbollah. More recently, Hezbollah has become self-sufficient¹¹⁶ to the point where it can assist regional IRGC-QF operations in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.¹¹⁷
- *Financial Support.* The State Department report for 2015 contained a specific figure, stating that Iran has provided Hezbollah with "hundreds of millions of dollars."¹¹⁸ On June 5, 2018, then-Under Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Sigal Mandelker cited a much higher figure of \$700 million in Iranian support to Hezbollah per year.¹¹⁹ The higher figure, restated in

¹¹⁵ Author conversations with various experts and U.S. officials in Washington, DC, 1985-2017.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ben Hubbard. *New York Times*, op cit.

¹¹⁸ Department of State. Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism. Country Reports on Terrorism; 2015.

¹¹⁹ Treasury Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Sigal Mandelker Delivers Remarks at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. CQ Newsmaker Transcripts. June 5, 2018. The State Department's September 2018 "Outlaw Regime" report repeated that \$700 million figure.

the 2020 State Department “Outlaw Regime” report referenced earlier, could reflect Hezbollah’s extensive combat in Syria. On the other hand, U.S. officials assert that U.S. sanctions on Iran are contributing to Hezbollah financial difficulties, including prompting the group to have to appeal for donations.

- *Weapons Transfers.* State Department reports and officials say that, according to the Israeli government, since the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah conflict, Hezbollah has stockpiled more than 130,000 rockets and missiles,¹²⁰ presumably supplied by Iran. Some are said to be capable of reaching population centers in central Israel. Israeli experts assert that Iran also has transferred to Hezbollah anti-ship and anti-aircraft capabilities.¹²¹ Iran has historically transferred weaponry to Hezbollah via Syria, offloading the material at Damascus airport and then trucking it over the border, but Iran has sometimes transferred weaponry directly to Hezbollah via Beirut.¹²² U.S. officials and outside experts assess that a key goal of Iran’s strategy in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon has been to assemble a secure land corridor from Iran through which to supply and assist Hezbollah.

U.S. Policy to Reduce Iran’s Support for Hezbollah

The Trump Administration has followed its predecessors in trying to disrupt the Iran-Hezbollah relationship, although without appreciably more success. The United States has not acted against Hezbollah militarily, but, as noted above, it has tacitly supported Israeli air strikes in Syria that are intended to disrupt Iranian weapons supplies to Hezbollah. Successive Administrations, including the Trump Administration, have also provided funding (Foreign Military Financing, FMF) for Lebanon to buy U.S. military equipment for the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), in part army to enable the LAF to serve as a counterweight to Hezbollah.

The Trump Administration has also increased sanctions against Hezbollah, using authorities that are often applied to Iran. During 2019 and 2020, the Trump Administration imposed sanctions on Hezbollah members of the Lebanese parliament and on Lebanese financial institutions alleged to be processing transactions on behalf of Hezbollah. The 115th Congress enacted legislation (P.L. 115-272) that expanded the authority to sanction foreign banks that transact business with Hezbollah, its affiliates, and partners.

Yemen¹²³

Iranian leaders have not historically identified Yemen as a core Iranian security interest, but they have taken advantage of gains by Zaidi Shia Houthi rebels – who ousted the Republic of Yemen Government from the capital, Sanaa, in 2014, to acquire significant leverage against Saudi Arabia and additional power projection capability. In March 2015, Saudi Arabia assembled an Arab coalition that helped the ousted government recapture some territory but bogged down into a stalemate while causing drastic humanitarian consequences.¹²⁴

¹²⁰ State Department terrorism report for 2016, op cit.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² “Iran, facing off against Israel in Syria, now sending arms directly to Lebanon,” *Times of Israel*, November 30, 2018.

¹²³ For more information, see CRS Report R43960, *Yemen: Civil War and Regional Intervention*, by Jeremy M. Sharp.

¹²⁴ Ali al-Mujahed and Hugh Naylor. “Yemen Rebels Defy Saudi-led Attacks.” *Washington Post*, March 28, 2015.

U.S., U.N. and Saudi officials accuse Iran of not only advising the Houthis militarily but also of providing the components for ballistic missiles that the Houthis continue to fire periodically on Saudi infrastructure targets.¹²⁵ On November 29, 2018, the head of Iran policy at the State Department, Ambassador Brian Hook, displayed missiles, rockets, and other equipment that he asserted were supplied by Iran to the Houthis and captured by Saudi-led coalition forces.¹²⁶ Iranian weapons shipments to the Houthis were, until October 18, 2020, banned by Resolution 2231 on Iran and remain prohibited by Resolution 2216 on Yemen.

The increasingly sophisticated nature of Iran's support for the Houthis could suggest that Iran perceives the Houthis as a means to project power into the vital Bab el-Mandeb Strait, a key shipping chokepoint. The Houthis fired Iran-supplied anti-ship missiles at UAE and U.S. ships in the Red Sea in October 2016, which prompted U.S. strikes on Houthi-controlled radar installations. In January 2017, the Houthis damaged a Saudi ship in the Red Sea. Reflecting U.S. concern, then-CENTCOM commander General Joseph Votel testified before the House Armed Services Committee on March 29, 2017 about the potential threat to the Bab el-Mandeb:

It is a choke point, it is a major transit area for commerce, not only ours but for international ships. About 60 to 70 ships go through there a day. What we have seen, I believe, that the—with the support of Iran, we have seen the migration of capabilities that we previously observed in the Straits of Hormuz, a layered defense, consists of coastal defense missiles and radar systems, mines, explosive boats that have been migrated from the Straits of Hormuz to this particular area right here, threatening commerce and ships and our security operations in that particular area.¹²⁷

Financial and Advisory Support

Many observers assess that Iran's support for the Houthis has been modest when compared to Iran's support for other regional allies. However, in Yemen, Iran's relatively small investment has had outsized returns.

- The State Department's "Outlaw Regime" report (2018 and 2020 update) states that since 2012, Iran "has spent hundreds of millions of dollars" aiding the Houthis.
- In a November 28, 2018 for Senators, Secretary Pompeo stated that a 20-person IRGC-QF unit called "Unit 190" is responsible for funneling Iranian weaponry to the Houthis.¹²⁸ Pompeo added that the head of the unit also arranges for the travel of IRGC-QF and Hezbollah advisers to go to Yemen to advise the Houthis. The State Department's "Outlaw Regime" report cites press reports that Iran might have sent some militia forces from Syria to fight alongside the Houthis in Yemen.

U.S. Policy to Counter Iranian Influence in Yemen

U.S. officials have cited Iran's support for the Houthis to argue for the main U.S. policy line of effort, which is providing logistical support to the Saudi-led Arab coalition battling the Houthis.

¹²⁵ Report of the Secretary-General on the Implementation of Security Council Resolution 2231 (2015). U.N. Document Number S/2016/589, July 12, 2016.

¹²⁶ Briefing by Brian Hook, Senior Policy Advisor to the Secretary of State and Special Representative for Iran. Joint Base Anacostia, Bolling, November 29, 2018.

¹²⁷ Testimony of Gen. Joseph Votel, Commander of U.S. Central Command. House Armed Services Committee. March 29, 2017.

¹²⁸ State Dept. Press Office. Secretary Pompeo's Remarks to Members of the Senate. November 28, 2018.

In his May 21, 2018, speech, Secretary Pompeo stipulated as one U.S. demand on Iran that the country must also end its military support for the Houthi militia and work towards a peaceful political settlement in Yemen. However, even though many Members of Congress express concerns with Iran's backing for the Houthis, several bills in the 116th Congress, which passed the House and the Senate, required a decrease, or even an end, to the U.S. support for the Arab coalition fighting in Yemen. These votes have been widely viewed as opposition to the civilian casualties caused by the Saudi-led effort as well as sentiment against Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman over the October 2018 Kashoggi killing and other of his initiatives.¹²⁹

The United States has also sought to prevent Iran from delivering weapons to the Houthis by conducting joint naval patrols with members of the Saudi-led coalition. Some weapons shipments have been intercepted, including a December 2019 seizure of a "significant cache" of Iranian missile parts bound for Yemen.¹³⁰ U.S. forces have not engaged in any bombing of the Houthis or Iranian advisers in Yemen. However, it was reported in January 2020 that U.S. special operations forces in Yemen had conducted—nearly simultaneously with the January 2, 2020, strike on Soleimani in Baghdad—an unsuccessful operation to kill or capture a key IRGC-QF operative in Yemen, Abdul Reza Shahrai.¹³¹ The operation came a few weeks after the U.S. State Department announced a \$15 million reward for information leading to his capture. The Trump Administration has also sanctioned IRGC-QF officers involved in Yemen.

On January 10, 2021, citing in large part the support the Houthis receive from Iran, the Trump Administration announced that it is designating the Houthis (Ansarallah) as an FTO. The announcement stated that there would be sanctions exemptions allowed so that the designation does not prohibit humanitarian aid to Yemen or diplomacy required to end the Yemen conflict.¹³²

The United States also has increased its assistance to Oman to train its personnel to prevent smuggling through its territory, presumably including the smuggling of Iranian weaponry to the Houthis.

Turkey¹³³

Turkey, a member of the U.S.-led NATO alliance whose citizens are mostly Sunni Muslims, shares a border with Iran. Turkey supported the JCPOA, in part because sanctions relief on Iran enabled Iran-Turkey trade to expand. Iran supplies as much as 50% of Turkey's oil and over 5% of its natural gas, the latter flowing through a joint pipeline that began operations in the late 1990s. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Iran and Turkey were at odds over the strategic engagement of Turkey's then leaders with Israel, but the differences faded somewhat after Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Islamist-rooted Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in Turkey. Under Erdogan, Turkey has supported Hamas, which also receives support from Iran (see above).

In 2011, significant Iran-Turkey strains when Turkey advocated Asad's ouster as part of a solution for conflict-torn Syria whereas Iran sought to keep him in power. However, Asad's gains since 2015 have caused Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to publicly accept that Asad is

¹²⁹ See CRS Insight IN10866, *Joint Resolution Seeks to End U.S. Support for Saudi-led Coalition Military Operations in Yemen*, by Christopher M. Blanchard, Jeremy M. Sharp, and Matthew C. Weed.

¹³⁰ Officials: U.S. Navy seizes suspected Iranian missile parts set for Yemen. NBC News, December 4, 2019.

¹³¹ On the day U.S. forces killed Soleimani, they targeted a senior Iranian official in Yemen. Washington Post, January 10, 2020.

¹³² Department of State. Terrorist Designation of Ansarallah in Yemen. January 10, 2021.

¹³³ For analysis on Turkey's foreign policy and U.S. relations, see CRS Report R44000, *Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations In Brief*, by Jim Zanotti and Clayton Thomas.

likely to remain in power in Syria and to join Iran in the Russia-led Astana Process political process mentioned above. In August 2017, the chief of staff of Iran's joint military headquarters visited Ankara in the first high-level Iranian military visit to Turkey since the Iranian revolution. Iran and Turkey are also cooperating to try to halt cross border attacks by Kurdish groups that oppose the governments of Turkey (Kurdistan Workers' Party, PKK) and of Iran (Free Life Party, PJAK), and which enjoy safe have in northern Iraq.

South and Central Asia

Iran's relations with countries in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and South Asia vary significantly. Some of the countries in the region face significant domestic threats from radical Sunni Islamist extremist movements. Afghanistan remains politically weak, and some countries in the region, particularly India, seek greater integration with the United States and downplay cooperation with Iran.

The South Caucasus

Azerbaijan is, like Iran, mostly Shia Muslim-inhabited. However, Azerbaijan is ethnically Turkic and its leadership is secular. Iran and Azerbaijan also have territorial differences over boundaries in the Caspian Sea, and Iran asserts that Azeri nationalism has stoked separatism among Iran's large Azeri population. Iran has generally tilted toward Armenia, which is Christian, in Armenia's conflict with Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave. Iran largely refrained from interfering in the outbreak of renewed Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict in late 2020 that saw Azerbaijan, backed largely by Turkey, regain the territories lost to Armenia in the mid-1990s.

For more than two decades, Azerbaijan has engaged in strategic cooperation with the United States against Iran (and Russia). In the 1990s, the United States successfully backed construction of the Baku-Tblisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, intended in part to bypass export routes controlled by Iran or Russia. The lifting of sanctions on Iran in 2016 contributed to Azerbaijan's modification of its policy toward Iran. In 2016, Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev hosted Rouhani and Russia's President Vladimir Putin at a "Baku Summit," that discussed a "North-South Transport Corridor" involving rail, road, and shipping infrastructure from Russia to Iran, through Azerbaijan.

Central Asia

Iran has generally sought positive relations with the leaderships of the Central Asian states, even though most of these leaderships are secular, all of the Central Asian states are mostly Sunni inhabited, and are Turkic-speaking (with the exception on Tajikistan which speaks mostly

Figure 4. South and Central Asia Region



Source: Created by CRS.

Persian). Several have active Sunni Islamist opposition movements, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU),¹³⁴ that Iranian leaders have identified as regional threats.

Iran has observer status in a Central Asian security grouping called the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO—Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan). In April 2008, Iran applied for full membership in the organization. In June 2010, the SCO barred admission to Iran because it was under U.N. Security Council sanctions.¹³⁵ Iran remains an observer even though Security Council sanctions ended in concert with the JCPOA.

Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan is a significant power by virtue of its geographic location, large territory, and ample natural resources. It hosted P5+1-Iran nuclear negotiations in 2013 and subsequently facilitated the fulfilling of a key JCPOA requirement – the shipment to Russia of almost all of Iran’s stockpile of low-enriched uranium. Kazakhstan’s National Atomic Company Kazatomprom supplied Iran with 60 metric tons of natural uranium on commercial terms as compensation for the removal of the material. When U.S. sanctions were eased, Iran was open to additional opportunities to cooperate with Kazakhstan on energy and infrastructure projects. The two countries are not at odds over specific sections of the Caspian Sea, but some aspects of the territorial questions regarding the Caspian were settled in 2018.

South Asia

The countries in South Asia face perhaps a greater degree of threat from Sunni Islamic extremist groups than do the countries of Central Asia. They also share significant common interests with Iran, which Iran used to foster cooperation against U.S. sanctions.

Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, Iran has pursued a multitrack strategy similar to that employed in Iraq: attempting to shape and influence the central government, using soft power to build good will, and providing support to non-state armed factions that oppose U.S. forces in the country. An Iranian goal appears to be to restore some of its traditional sway in western, central, and northern Afghanistan, where “Dari”-speaking (Dari is akin to Persian) supporters of the “Northern Alliance” grouping of non-Pashtun Afghan minorities predominate. Iran shares with the Afghan government concern about the growth of the Islamic State affiliate in Afghanistan, Islamic State—Khorasan Province (ISKP). Iran and Afghanistan have cooperated against narcotics trafficking across their border.

Iran has sought influence in Afghanistan in part by supporting the Afghan government, which is dominated by Sunni Muslims and ethnic Pashtuns, but which has many figures of Tajik origin who have long-standing close ties to Iran. Afghan President Ghani and Iranian leaders meet regularly.¹³⁶ In October 2010, then-President Hamid Karzai admitted that Iran was providing cash

¹³⁴ Sébastien Peyrouse. “Iran’s Growing Role in Central Asia? Geopolitical, Economic, and Political Profit and Loss Account.” Al Jazeera Center for Studies. April 6, 2014. The IMU, which is active in Afghanistan, in mid-2015 declared its loyalty to the Islamic State organization.

¹³⁵ Substantially more detail on Iran’s activities in Afghanistan is contained in CRS Report RL30588, *Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy*, by Kenneth Katzman and Clayton Thomas.

¹³⁶ Iran to make all-out effort to strengthen Afghanistan’s stability. Mehr News, June 15, 2019.

payments (about \$2 million per year) to his government and Iran has provided financial support to the campaigns of Afghan candidates that are well disposed toward Iran.¹³⁷

According to past State Department reports on international terrorism, Iran has provided materiel support to select Taliban and other militants in Afghanistan, and trained Taliban fighters, according to U.S. officials and reports. In his May 21, 2018, speech on Iran policy, Secretary Pompeo demanded that “Iran, too, must end support for the Taliban and other terrorists in Afghanistan and the region, and cease harboring senior Al Qaeda leaders.”¹³⁸ Secretary of State Pompeo also accused Iran of being behind a 2019 bombing in Kabul.

Reflecting apparent concern about the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, Iran reportedly tried to derail the U.S.-Afghanistan Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA), signed in September 2014, that allowed the United States to maintain troops in Afghanistan. Iran insisted on language in that accord, which was incorporated into it, that prohibits the United States from launching military action against other countries from Afghanistan.

Iranian support to Taliban factions comes despite the fact that Iran saw the Taliban regime in Afghanistan of 1996-2001 as an adversary. The Taliban allegedly committed atrocities against Shia Afghans (of the Hazara ethnicity) while seizing control of Persian-speaking areas of western and northern Afghanistan. Taliban fighters killed nine Iranian diplomats at Iran’s consulate in Mazar-e-Sharif in August 1998, prompting Iran to mobilize ground forces to the Afghan border. During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1979-1989), Iran supported various Shia armed factions, particularly a union of several groups called Hezb-e-Wahdat.

Pakistan¹³⁹

Relations between Iran and Pakistan have been uneven. Pakistan supported Iran in the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War, and Iran and Pakistan engaged in substantial military cooperation in the early 1990s, and the two still conduct some military cooperation, such as joint naval exercises in April 2014. The founder of Pakistan’s nuclear weapons program, A.Q. Khan, sold nuclear technology and designs to Iran.¹⁴⁰ However, a rift emerge between the two countries in the 1990s because Pakistan’s support for the Afghan Taliban ran counter to Iran’s support for the Persian-speaking and Shia Muslim minorities who opposed Taliban rule. Iranian Sunni Muslim militant oppositionists—*Jundullah* (named by the United States as an FTO, as discussed above), and renamed *Jaysh al-Adl*—operate from western Pakistan.

Pakistan appeared to tilt sharply against Iran when it joined Saudi Arabia’s 34-nation “antiterrorism coalition” in December 2015, which was announced as a response to the Islamic State. However, in October 2019, Saudi Arabia reportedly sought out Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, among other possible mediators, to help Saudi Arabia lower tension with Iran. Khan visited Tehran that month for talks with Iranian leaders as part of that effort.¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ Dexter Filkins. “Iran Is Said to Give Top Karzai Aide Cash by the Bagful.” *New York Times*, October 23, 2010; “In Western Afghan City, Iran Makes Itself Felt.” *Los Angeles Times*, November 14, 2010. See also Department of Defense, “Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan.” June 2019, p. 20.

¹³⁸ Secretary of State Michael Pompeo. After the Deal: A New Iran Strategy. Heritage Foundation, May 21, 2018.

¹³⁹ For detail on Pakistan’s foreign policy and relations with the United States, see CRS Report R41832, *Pakistan-U.S. Relations*, by K. Alan Kronstadt.

¹⁴⁰ “Pakistanis Say Nuclear Scientists Aided Iran,” *Washington Post*, January 24, 2004.

¹⁴¹ Al Jazeera, October 13, 2019.

India¹⁴²

India and Iran have overlapping histories and civilizations, and they are aligned on several strategic issues. Tens of millions of India's citizens are Shia Muslims. Both countries have historically supported minority factions in Afghanistan that are generally at odds with Afghanistan's dominant Pashtun community. India has cooperated with U.S. sanctions policy on Iran, even though India's position has generally been that it will only enforce sanctions authorized by U.N. Security Council resolutions.

During the late 1990s, U.S. officials expressed concern about India-Iran military-to-military ties. The relationship included visits to India by Iranian naval personnel, although India said these exchanges involved junior personnel and focused mainly on promoting interpersonal relations and not on India's provision to Iran of military expertise.

Russia

Iran attaches significant weight to its relations with Russia—a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council, a supplier of arms to Iran, a party to the JCPOA, and a key supporter of the Asad regime. Russia also appears to view Iran as a de facto ally in combating Sunni Islamist extremist movements. Russia opposed the U.S. exit from the JCPOA and the reimposition of U.S. secondary sanctions on Iran. Russian officials have largely blamed Washington's maximum pressure policy for the U.S.-Iran tensions since May 2019. The two countries have exchanged several presidential visits.

U.S. officials express concern with Iran-Russia military cooperation, particularly in Syria. Russia-Iran cooperation has been pivotal to the Asad regime's recapture of much of rebel-held territory since 2015. Yet, the two countries' interests do not align precisely in Syria insofar as Iranian leaders support Asad's refusal to dilute his authority, whereas Russia does not.

Russia has been Iran's main supplier of conventional weaponry and a significant supplier of missile-related technology. In 2016, Iran's then-Defense Minister Hosein Dehghan visited Moscow reportedly to discuss purchasing Su-30 combat aircraft, T-90 tanks, helicopters, and other defense equipment.¹⁴³ Russia previously has abided by all U.N. sanctions to the point of initially cancelling a contract to sell Iran the advanced S-300 air defense system—even though Resolution 1929, which banned most arms sales to Iran, did not specifically ban the sale of the S-300. After the April 2, 2015, framework nuclear accord was agreed, Russia delivered the system. In January 2015, Iran and Russia signed a memorandum of understanding on defense cooperation. Russia built and still supplies fuel for Iran's only operating civilian nuclear power reactor at Bushehr, a project from which Russia earns significant revenues.

Europe

Iran has sought to exploit differences between the European countries and the Trump Administration on Iran policy. The EU countries seek to keep the JCPOA intact by providing Iran the economic benefits of the accord. But, the EU has struggled in those efforts because European companies have largely ceased transactions with Iran in order not to jeopardize business in the

¹⁴² For detail on India's foreign policy and relations with the United States, see CRS Report R42823, *India-U.S. Security Relations: Current Engagement*, by K. Alan Kronstadt and Sonia Pinto.

¹⁴³ Iran Plans Buying SU-30 Fighters, Mi-17 and Mi-8 Choppers, Weapons In \$8 Billion Deal With Russia. Defense World, February 17, 2016.

United States. While criticizing Iran's provocative actions in the Gulf, in Iraq, and elsewhere, European leaders have also sought to ease U.S.-Iran tensions.

The European countries have criticized Iran for alleged Iranian plots to assassinate dissidents in Europe. In January 2018, Germany arrested 10 IRGC-QF operatives. In March 2018, Albania arrested two Iranian operatives for terrorist plotting. In mid-2018, authorities in Germany, Belgium, and France arrested Iranian operatives, including one based at Iran's embassy in Austria, for a suspected plot to bomb a rally by Iranian dissidents in Paris. In October 2018, an Iranian operative was arrested for planning assassinations in Denmark. In January 2019, in response to Dutch allegations of Iranian assassinations of Dutch nationals of Iranian origin, the EU sanctioned the internal security unit of Iran's Intelligence ministry and two Iranian operatives for sponsoring acts of terrorism.¹⁴⁴

Iranian dissident assassinations in Europe have long disrupted Iran-Europe relations. During the 1990s, the United States had no dialogue with Iran at all, whereas the EU countries maintained a policy of "critical dialogue" and refused to join the 1995 U.S. trade and investment ban on Iran. That dialogue was suspended in April 1997 in response to the German terrorism trial ("Mykonos trial") that found high-level Iranian involvement in killing Iranian dissidents in Germany.

East Asia

East Asia includes Iran's largest buyer of crude oil – China – and one country, North Korea, that has consistently defied international sanctions by supplying Iran with missile and other military-related technology.

China¹⁴⁵

China, a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council and a P5+1 party to the JCPOA, is also Iran's largest oil customer and a significant investor in Iran. As do Iran's leaders, China government officials assert that China faces a potential threat from Sunni Muslim extremists. During U.N. Security Council deliberations on Iran during 2006-2013, China argued against strict sanctions on Iran, but China's compliance with U.S. sanctions was pivotal to U.S. efforts to reduce Iran's revenue from oil sales during 2012-2016. China opposed the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA, it has continued to buy Iranian oil, and it has become a major investor in Iran in line with China's President Xi Jinping's vision of an energy and transportation corridor extending throughout Eurasia (Belt and Road Initiative, BRI)..

When doing so was not banned by the United Nations, China openly supplied Iran with advanced conventional arms, including cruise missile-armed fast patrol boats that the IRGC Navy operates in the Persian Gulf; anti-ship missiles; ballistic missile guidance systems; and other WMD-related technology.¹⁴⁶ Some military-related sales by China entities might have continued and the United States has sanctioned a number of China-based entities for allegedly supplying Iran's missile, nuclear, and conventional weapons programs. Iran and China reportedly have negotiating the sale to Iran of additional conventional weaponry, such as the J-10 combat aircraft – a sale that is more likely to proceed now that the U.N. ban on arms sales to Iran is deemed by the Security Council to have expired.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴ "E.U. Imposes Sanctions on Iran over Assassination Plots in 2015 and 2017." New York Times, January 9, 2019.

¹⁴⁵ CRS In Focus IF10029, *China, U.S. Leadership, and Geopolitical Challenges in Asia*, by Susan V. Lawrence.

¹⁴⁶ Defense Intelligence Agency. Iran Military Power: 2019

¹⁴⁷ Iran May Buy Chinese J-10Cs Using Part of \$3B Qatar Funds. Defense World, January 17, 2020.

Japan and South Korea

Iran's primary interest in Japan and South Korea has been to continue to sell oil and other energy products to both countries. However, Japanese and South Korean firms are consistently unwilling to risk their positions in the U.S. market by violating any U.S. sanctions on Iran, and these companies largely left the Iran market after U.S. secondary sanctions were reimposed in 2018. Both countries have ceased importing Iranian oil, although both import significant quantities of oil from the GCC states and have a direct interest in the security of commercial shipping in the Gulf. In late 2019, Japan deployed a warship to the Gulf on a security mission separate from the U.S.-led IMSC discussed above. Both countries are also wary of Iran's reported military and technology relations with North Korea.

Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited Iran in late June 2019, amidst heightened U.S.-Iran tensions. The long-delayed visit, the first by a leader of Japan to the Islamic Republic, reportedly sought to de-escalate U.S.-Iran tensions, but no progress was announced. It was followed up by a visit to Japan by Iranian President Rouhani in late December 2019, but again failing to reduce overall tensions in the Gulf.

South Korea's then-President Geun-hye Park visited Tehran in May 2016, a few months after the JCPOA began implementation, for the first tour of Iran by a South Korean president to Iran since 1962. The two sides signed a number of agreements in the fields of oil and gas, railroads, tourism, and technology, and agreed to reestablish direct flights between Tehran and Seoul. However, these economic projects were put on hold when the Trump Administration withdrew from the JCPOA and reimposed all U.S. sanctions on Iran in 2018. Iran has strongly criticized South Korea for refusing to compel its banks to allow Iran to use its estimated \$7 billion in Iranian assets that are in South Korean banks; the banks argue that they are prevented by U.S. sanctions from releasing the funds, including for humanitarian purposes. The dispute might have contributed to the January 2021 Iranian seizure of a South Korean oil tanker in the Persian Gulf.¹⁴⁸

North Korea

Iran and North Korea have been aligned as “rogue states” that are subjected to wide-ranging international sanctions. North Korea is one of the few countries with which Iran has formal military-to-military relations, and the two countries have cooperated on a wide range of military and WMD-related ventures, particularly the development of ballistic missile technology.¹⁴⁹ North Korea also reportedly supplied Iran with small submarines and other conventional arms. The extent of any ongoing cooperation on missiles or nuclear technology is not known publicly.

North Korea has not pledged to abide by international sanctions against Iran, but its economy is too small to significantly help Iran. According to some observers, a portion of China's purchases of oil from Iran and other suppliers is re-exported to North Korea.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ South Korean diplomat in Iran over seized ship, frozen funds. *Associated Press*, January 10, 2021.

¹⁴⁹ Iran Military Power: 2019

¹⁵⁰ CRS conversations with South Korea diplomats. 2011-2020.

Latin America¹⁵¹

Iran has cultivated relations with several leaders in Latin America, particularly those with strained relations with the United States. There are reportedly IRGC-QF operatives and Hezbollah members in Latin America who can potentially carry out terrorist attacks there. Some U.S. officials have asserted that Iran and Hezbollah's activities in Latin America include money laundering and trafficking in drugs and counterfeit goods.¹⁵² These concerns were heightened during the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013), who made repeated, high-profile visits to the region in an effort to circumvent U.S. sanctions and stoke support for his criticisms of U.S. policies. President Rouhani made his only visit to the region in September 2016.

The Latin American countries with which Iran has exerted the most significant efforts to build ties to, or operational capability in, are Venezuela, Argentina, and Cuba. U.S. counterterrorism officials also have stated that the tri-border area of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay is a "nexus" of arms, narcotics and human trafficking, counterfeiting, and other potential funding sources for terrorist organizations, including Hezbollah.¹⁵³ The Trump Administration has praised Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Colombia, Honduras, and Guatemala for declaring Hezbollah as a terrorist organization.¹⁵⁴

Venezuela¹⁵⁵

Iran developed close relations with Venezuela during the rule of anti-U.S. leader Hugo Chavez, who died in office in March 2013. Neither Rouhani nor Chavez's successor, Nicolas Maduro, have expressed the enthusiasm for the relationship that Chavez and Ahmadinejad did, but Iran has expressed support for Maduro against his significant, U.S.-supported domestic opposition. In April 2019, Iran resumed a long-dormant direct air route from Tehran to Venezuela.¹⁵⁶ In the context of stepped up unrest in Venezuela in April-May 2019, U.S. officials accused Iran and Hezbollah of helping Maduro retain support within the Venezuelan

Figure 5. Latin America



Source: Created by CRS.

¹⁵¹ See CRS Report RS21049, *Latin America: Terrorism Issues*, by Mark P. Sullivan and June S. Beittel.

¹⁵² Posture Statement of General John F. Kelly, Commander, U.S. Southern Command, before the 114th Congress, Senate Armed Services Committee, March 12, 2015.

¹⁵³ In the 112th Congress, the Countering Iran in the Western Hemisphere Act (P.L. 112-220) required the Administration to develop a strategy to counter Iran's influence in Latin America. The strategy was provided to Congress in June 2013.

¹⁵⁴ Pompeo vows US support as he meets Venezuela's Guaido in Colombia. *Al Jazeera*, January 21, 2020.

¹⁵⁵ For more information, see CRS Report R43239, *Venezuela: Issues for Congress, 2013-2016*, by Mark P. Sullivan.

¹⁵⁶ "New Air Bridge Reflects Iran's Growing Influence in Venezuela." VOA News, April 15, 2019.

military.¹⁵⁷ Secretary of State Pompeo, apparently referring in particular to Venezuela, told a journalist that Iran and Hezbollah have “put down roots” in “America’s backyard.”¹⁵⁸

During the presidencies of Chavez and Ahmadinejad, the United States did not necessarily perceive a threat from the Iran-Venezuela relationship. In July 2012, President Obama stated that Iran-Venezuela ties have not had “a serious national security impact on the United States.”¹⁵⁹

Argentina¹⁶⁰

In Argentina, Iran and Hezbollah carried out major acts of terrorism against Israeli and Jewish targets in Buenos Aires in 1992 and 1994. Argentinian officials and prosecutors have asserted that these attacks were carried out by Hezbollah operatives, assisted by Iranian diplomats, although no one has been convicted.¹⁶¹ Many in Argentina’s Jewish community opposed a January 2013 agreement between Iran and the government of then-President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner to form a “truth commission” rather than to aggressively prosecute the Iranians involved. In May 2013, the Argentine prosecutor in the AMIA bombing case, Alberto Nisman, issued a 500-page report alleging that Iran has been working for decades in Latin America, setting up intelligence stations in the region by utilizing embassies, cultural organizations, and even mosques as a source of recruitment.

There have not been any recent public indications that Iran and/or Hezbollah are planning attacks in Argentina or elsewhere in Latin America. During a July 18, 2019, visit to Argentina by Secretary of State Pompeo to attend a regional counter-terrorism conference and commemorate that 25th anniversary of the AMIA bombing, Argentina designated Hezbollah as a terrorist organization.

¹⁵⁷ Iran Calls Pompeo’s Accusations of Meddling in Venezuela ‘Ridiculous.’ Telesur, April 15, 2019.

¹⁵⁸ Pompeo: Iranian Proxy Mobilizing in America’s Backyard. The American Conservative, January 28, 2020.

¹⁵⁹ Comments by President Barack Obama on “CNN: The Situation Room,” July 11, 2012.

¹⁶⁰ For more information, see CRS Report R43816, *Argentina: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Mark P. Sullivan and Rebecca M. Nelson.

¹⁶¹ Daniel Politi. “Argentina Says Those in Hezbollah Are Terrorists.” New York Times, July 19, 2019.

Africa

Sub-Saharan Africa has not generally been a focus of Iranian foreign policy. Former President Ahmadinejad sought to expand ties to some African countries, particularly those that have had historically tense relations with Western powers. Many African countries apparently do not want to risk their relationships with the United States, with Sunni Muslim powers, or with Sunni citizens by expanding ties to Iran.

The overwhelming majority of Muslims in Africa are Sunni, and Muslim-majority African countries have tended to be responsive to financial and diplomatic overtures from Iran's rivals in the GCC. West Africa's large Lebanese diaspora communities may also be a target of Iranian influence operations and a conduit for Hezbollah financial and criminal activities.

Rouhani has apparently not made Africa a priority, but Tehran has cultivating some African countries as trading partners to resist the Trump Administration's campaign of maximum pressure on Iran. Iran's leaders also apparently see Africa as a market for its arms exports and as sources of diplomatic support in U.N. forums.¹⁶² African populations may also be seen as potential targets for Iranian "soft power" and religious influence. Iran's Al Mustafa University, which promotes Iran's message and Shia religious orientation with branches worldwide, has numerous branches in various African countries.¹⁶³

The IRGC-QF has reportedly operated in some countries in Africa, in part to secure arms-supply routes for pro-Iranian movements in the Middle East but also to be positioned to act against U.S. or allied interests and to support friendly governments or factions. Several African countries have claimed to disrupt purportedly IRGC-QF-backed arms trafficking or terrorism plots.

Sudan¹⁶⁴

Iran's relations with the government of Sudan, which were extensive in the 1990s, have frayed since 2014 as Sudan has moved closer to Iran's GCC rivals. Sudan, which underwent significant political change in 2019 with the popular uprising that led to the downfall of a longtime military

Figure 6. Sudan



Source: Created by CRS.

¹⁶² On arms sales, see C.J. Chivers. "A Trail of Bullet Casings Leads from Africa's Wars back to Iran." *New York Times*, January 11, 2013.

¹⁶³ Iranain American Forum, "Al Mustafa University, Iran's Global Network of Islamic Schools." April 12, 2016. <http://iranian-americans.com/irans-export-of-islamic-fundamentalism-al-mustafa-global-training-centers-2/>.

¹⁶⁴ See CRS Report R43957, *Sudan*, by Lauren Ploch Blanchard, and CRS Report R45794, *Sudan's Uncertain Transition*, by Lauren Ploch Blanchard.

dictatorship, moved further from Iran in late 2020 by agreeing to normalize relations with Israel and, in turn, obtaining removal from the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism.¹⁶⁵

Iran-Sudan relations burgeoned in the 1990s when Islamist leaders in Sudan, who came to power in 1989, welcomed international Islamist movements to train and organize there. Iran began supplying Sudan with weapons it used on its various fronts, such as in its internal conflicts with rebels in what is now South Sudan as well as in the Darfur region. The IRGC-QF reportedly armed and trained Sudanese forces, Iranian pilots reportedly assisted Sudan's air force, Iran's naval forces visited Port Sudan, and Iran reportedly helped Sudan build a military production industry.¹⁶⁶ During this period, Israel repeatedly accused Iran of transshipping weapons to Hamas via Sudan,¹⁶⁷ and Israel at times, took military action against sites in Sudan that Israel asserted were controlled by Iran.¹⁶⁸

However, Sudan's poor financial situation rendered it susceptible to overtures from Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries. Saudi, UAE, and Qatari economic assistance to and investment in Sudan have contributed to decisions by Sudan's leaders to distance the country from Iran. In September 2014, Sudan closed all Iranian cultural centers and expelled the cultural attaché and other Iranian diplomats on the grounds that Iran was using the facilities to promote Shia Islam.¹⁶⁹ In March 2015, Sudan deployed troops to the Saudi-led Arab coalition against the Houthis in Yemen (see above). In January 2016, Sudan severed ties with Iran in connection with the Saudi execution of Nimr. There are no indications that a transitional military government that took power from President Omar Hassan al-Bashir following mass popular protests in April 2019 seeks to rebuild relations with Iran, and Saudi Arabia and the UAE have given the transitional regime billions of dollars in aid.

Outlook

Key questions for evaluating the outlook for Iran's national security policy might take into account Iran's leadership composition, its domestic politics and economic performance, and the policies of Iran's adversaries and allies. Since Iran's 1979 revolution, no U.S. strategy has seemed to reduce Iran's inclination or capability to intervene in the region. It can be argued that the level of Iran's regional influence is linked largely to opportunities provided by the region's conflicts.

Those who argue that Iran is an increasingly challenging regional actor maintain the following:

- Iran is likely to continue to supply its regional allies and proxies with larger quantities of and more accurate weaponry, including short-range and cruise missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles.
- Iran is likely to undertake additional actions in an effort to pressure the United States and its partners to ease sanctions, even though the incoming Biden Administration has expressed willingness to ease sanctions if Iran returns to full compliance with the JCPOA.

¹⁶⁵ "U.S. is Open to Removing Sudan from Terrorism List, Diplomat Says." *New York Times*, November 16, 2017.

¹⁶⁶ See, e.g., Small Arms Survey. "Sudan's Military Industry Corporation Display at the 2015 IDEX Convention." March 9, 2015.

¹⁶⁷ "Were the Israelis Behind the 'Mystery' Air Strike in Sudan?" *Time*, April 6, 2011; "Rockets and Meetings," Africa Confidential, May 25, 2012. Weapons Documented in South Kordofan," *Small Arms Survey*, April 2012.

¹⁶⁸ "Israel Navy Intercepts Gaza-Bound Iranian Rocket Ship Near Port Sudan." *Jerusalem Post*, March 5, 2014.

¹⁶⁹ "Sudan Expels Iranian Diplomats and Closes Cultural Centers." *The Guardian*, September 2, 2014.

- Iran might succeed in establishing a secure land corridor extending from Iran to Lebanon.
 - Iran has the potential to continue to expand its influence in Iraq and to compel Iraqi leaders to insist that all remaining U.S. forces leave Iraq.
 - The lifting of the U.N. ban on arms sales to Iran in October 2020 might enable Iran to move forward on new conventional arms buys, although Iran's financial resources are limited.
- Various regional powers might establish or expand military cooperation with Iran, a development that could strengthen Iran's conventional capabilities.
- A victory by a hardliners in the June 2021 Iranian presidential election might prompt Iran to increase its challenges to U.S. policies and forces.

Some who take the view that the threat from Iran is being reduced argue the following:

- Iranian leaders have expressed willingness to negotiate with the incoming Biden Administration on a rededication to the terms of the JCPOA.
- Iran might be willing to negotiate limits on its development of missiles in any "follow on" talks that the Biden Administration says it envisions after both sides return to fully implementing the JCPOA..
- Some assess that Iran might be persuaded, if given sufficient incentives, to negotiate limits or an end to its arms transfers to Hezbollah and Hamas, although Iran is unlikely under any circumstances to reduce its political support for Hezbollah.
- Iran might support a political solution in Yemen that gives the Houthis less influence in a new government than they are demanding.
- Iran and the UAE might resolve their territorial dispute.
- Iran might seek to finalize regional economic projects, including development of oil and gas fields in the Caspian Sea; gas pipeline linkages between Iran and Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, and Pakistan; and transportation routes to China.
- Iran's struggles with the health and economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic could cause Iran to retrench its regional malign activities.
- Domestic unrest might cause the regime to reduce the scope of its interventions, cut its defense budget, or limit its missile development program.
- If unrest escalates dramatically and the regime loses power, Iran's foreign policy could shift dramatically, likely becoming far more favorable to U.S. interests.
- The departure from the scene of the Supreme Leader could change Iran's foreign policy sharply, depending on the views of his successor.

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