Congressional Research Service
Informing the legislative debate since 1914

Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies

Updated January 30, 2020

Congressional Research Service
https://crsreports.congress.gov
R44017

CRS REPORT
Prepared for Members and
Committees of Congress

Congressional Research Service
Informing the legislative debate since 1914

SUMMARY

R44017

January 30, 2020

Kenneth Katzman
Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs

Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies

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

- Seeks to deter or thwart U.S. or other efforts to invade or intimidate Iran or to bring about a change of regime.
- Has sought to take advantage of opportunities of regional conflicts to overturn a power structure in the Middle East that it asserts favors the United States, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and other Sunni Muslim Arab regimes.
- Seeks to enhance its international prestige and restore a sense of "greatness" reminiscent of ancient Persian empires.
- Advances its national security goals in part by providing material support to regional allied governments and armed factions. Iranian officials characterize the support as helping the region's "oppressed" and assert that Saudi Arabia, in particular, is instigating sectarian tensions and trying to exclude Iran from regional affairs.
- Sometimes disagrees on tactics and strategies. Supreme Leader Ali Khamene'i and key hardline institutions, such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), oppose any compromises of Iran's national security core goals. Iran's elected president, Hassan Rouhani, and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif have supported Iran's integration into international diplomacy.
- Supports acts of international terrorism, as the "leading" or "most active" state sponsor of terrorism, according to each annual State Department report on international terrorism since the early 1990s.
- Uses Iran's military assets and proxies to try to achieve an easing of sanctions pressure.

The Administration insists that an end to Iran's "malign activities" is a requirement of 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.
- Deploying U.S. forces to deter Iran and interdict its arms shipments to its allies and proxies, and threatening military action against Iranian actions that threaten U.S. regional interests or allies.
- Training, arming, and providing counterterrorism assistance to partner governments and some allied substate actors in the region.

Contents

Introduction 1
Drivers of Iran's Policy 1
Threat Perception 1
Ideology 2
National Interests 2
Factional Interests, Competition, and Public Opinion 3
Instruments of Iran's National Security Strategy 3
Support to Allied Regimes and Groups and Use of Terrorism 3
Direct Military Action/Cyberattacks 5
Other Political Action/Soft Power 6
Diplomacy 7
Iran's Nuclear and Defense Programs 8
Nuclear Program 8
Nuclear Weapons Time Frame Estimates 8
Diplomatic History of Addressing Iran's Nuclear Program 9
The Obama Administration and the JCPOA 9
The Trump Administration and the Deterioration of the JCPOA 10
Missile Programs and Chemical and Biological Weapons Capability 11
Missiles 11
Chemical and Biological Weapons 14
Conventional and "Asymmetric Warfare" Capability 15
Asymmetric Warfare Capacity 15
Military-to-Military Relationships 16
Iranian Arms Transfers and U.N. Restrictions 16
Defense Budget 17
Countering Iran 20
Threatening Military Action 21
Near East Region 22
The Persian Gulf 23
Iranian Threats to Gulf Security 27
U.S.-GCC Defense Cooperation Agreements 28
Iranian Policy on Iraq, Syria, and the Islamic State 33
Iraq 34
Syria 37
Hamas, Hezbollah, and other Anti-Israel Groups 38
Hamas 39
Hezbollah 40
Yemen/Bab el Mandeb Strait 42
Turkey 44
North Africa 45
Egypt 45
Morocco 45
South and Central Asia 46
The South Caucasus 46
Central Asia 47
Turkmenistan 47

Tajikistan 48
Kazakhstan 48
Uzbekistan 48
South Asia 49
Afghanistan 49
Pakistan 50
India 51
Russia 51
Europe 52
East Asia 53
China 53
Japan and South Korea 53
North Korea 54
Latin America 54
Venezuela 55
Argentina 56
Africa 57
Sudan 58
Outlook 58

Figures

Figure 1. Iran's Regional Activities 22
Figure 2. Map of Near East 23
Figure 3. U.S. CENTCOM Regional Presence 32
Figure 4. South and Central Asia Region 46
Figure 5. Latin America 55
Figure 6. Sudan 57

Tables

Table 1. Selected Iran or Iran-Related Terrorism Attacks or Plots 6
Table 2. Iran's Missile and Drone Arsenal 13
Table 3. Iran's Conventional Military Arsenal 18
Table 4. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) 19
Table 5. Military Assets of the Gulf Cooperation Council Member States 32

Contacts

Author Information 60

Introduction

Successive Administrations have identified Iran as a key national security challenge. The Trump Administration assessed the threat posed by Iran in a September 2018 State Department report entitled "Outlaw Regime: A Chronicle of Iran's Destructive Activities," which outlined a litany of Iranian actions that the Administration terms "the Iranian regime's destructive behavior at home and abroad." The U.S. intelligence community testified in January 2019 that "Iran's regional ambitions and improved military capabilities almost certainly will threaten U.S. interests in the coming year, driven by Tehran's perception of increasing U.S., Saudi, and Israeli hostility, as well as continuing border insecurity, and the influence of hardliners." An annual Defense Department report on Iran's military power required by successive National Defense Authorization Acts (NDAAs) generally contain assessments similar to those presented by the intelligence community.[1]

This report analyzes Iran's foreign and defense policies and capabilities to implement its policies. Greater focus on the U.S.-Iran tensions since mid-2019, which have manifested in military attacks on each other's forces, 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. One expert asserts that Iran has not decided whether it is a "nation, or a cause."[2]

Threat Perception

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

- Supreme Leader Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i, Iran's paramount decisionmaker since 1989, has repeatedly asserted that the United States seeks to overturn Iran's regime.[3]
- Iran's leaders assert that the U.S. military presence in and around the Persian Gulf region reflects intent to intimidate or attack Iran.[4]
- Iran's leaders assert that the United States' support for regional Sunni Arab regimes has empowered radical Sunni Islamist groups such as the Islamic State.[5]

[1] Defense Intelligence Agency. Iran Military Power: 2019. Released November 2019. The FY2016 and FY2017 NDAAs (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 nonstate actors to conduct or mask its cyber operations.

[2] Foreign Policy Association. "A Candid Discussion with Karim Sadjadpour." May 6, 2013. http://foreignpolicyblogs.com/2013/05/06/a-candid-discussion-with-karim-sadjadpour/.

[3] Khamene'i: "U.S. Would Overthrow Iranian Government If It Could—Media." *Reuters*, February 8, 2014.

[4] Erik Slavin. "Iran Emphasizes Nuclear Reconciliation, Criticizes U.S. Military Posture in Persian Gulf." *Stars and Stripes*, March 5, 2014. http://www.stripes.com/news/iran-emphasizes-nuclear-reconciliation-criticizes-us-military-posture-in-persian-gulf-1.271204.

[5] "Iranians Rally to Support Iraq; Some Blame U.S. for Sunni Insurgency." *Los Angeles Times*, June 24, 2014.

- Iran's provocative actions in the Persian Gulf region in mid-2019 appear intended, at least in part, to pressure the United States and European countries to provide relief from the ever-increasing U.S. sanctions that Iranian leaders call "economic terrorism" or "economic warfare."

Ideology

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

- For several years after the revolution, Iran attempted to "export" its revolution to nearby Muslim states, but Iran downplayed that goal in the 1990s as its activities produced resistance to Iran in the region.[6] However, the various conflicts in the region that arose from the 2011 "Arab Spring" uprisings have given Iran opportunities to revive that goal to some extent.
- 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. Iran claims that the region's politics and economics have been distorted by Western intervention, economic domination, and the creation of Israel.
- 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.[7] 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 pan-Islamic and nonsectarian, citing its support for Sunni groups such as Hamas and for Sunni non-Islamist groups such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC).

National Interests

Iran's national interests usually dovetail with, but 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. 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 only in the 1960s and 1970s. To this extent, many of Iran's foreign policy actions are similar to those undertaken by the Shah of Iran and prior Iranian dynasties.
- Iran has not backed Islamist movements in the Central Asian countries because these states and their Islamist movements are Sunni Muslim and threats to Iran.

[6] Soner Cagaptay, James F. Jeffrey, and Mehdi Khalaji. "Iran Won't Give Up on Its Revolution." *New York Times*, op-ed, April 26, 2015.

[7] Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Chapter Ten: Foreign Policy.

- 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.
- Even though Iranian leaders accuse U.S. allies of contributing to U.S. aims in the Middle East, Iranian officials have sought to engage with some historic U.S. allies, such as Turkey, to parry sanctions and consolidate Iran's position in Syria.

Factional Interests, Competition, and Public Opinion

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

- Supreme Leader Khamene'i sits as the apex of Iran's hardliners. His consistent refrain, and the title of his book widely available in Iran, is "I am a revolutionary, not a diplomat."[8] He and leaders of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the military and internal security force created after the Islamic revolution, support regional interventions despite the risks of doing so.
- More moderate Iranian leaders, including President Hassan Rouhani, argue that Iran should not have any "permanent enemies." They maintain that a pragmatic foreign policy has resulted in European support for the JCPOA despite Trump Administration opposition to that accord, increased worldwide attention to Iran's views, and the positioning of Iran as a trade hub.
- The degree to which public opinion affects Iranian foreign policy is not clear. During protests in Iran since late 2017, some protesters have expressed opposition to the use of Iran's financial resources for regional interventions rather than to improve the living standards of the population. And, the 2011-2016 period of comprehensive international sanctions weakened Iran's economy and living standards to the point where the government accepted a compromise to limit its nuclear program. Yet, the regime has not at any time shifted its regional policies in response to domestic public opinion.

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. In some cases, such as Lebanese Hezbollah and some Iraqi Shia factions, Iran has established Shia militia groups as armed factions and, through funding and advice, has helped build them into political movements that acquire political legitimacy and seats in national parliaments and cabinets.[9]

- 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

[8] http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/21/world/middleeast/iran-us-nuclear-talks.html?_r=0.

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

United States as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs). 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 violent groups in Bahrain.[10] The Houthis and some of the Iran-backed militias in Iraq and violent groups in Bahrain, as well as the Taliban, are not named as FTOs. Iran was placed on the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism ("terrorism list") in January 1984.[11]

- 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 Agency to have about 5,000 personnel,[12] was headed by IRGC Major General Qasem Soleimani, until his death from a U.S. airstrike on January 2, 2020. His successor is Esma'il Qaani, who was appointed by Khamene'i immediately after Soleimani's death. The deputy commander, appointed on January 20, 2020, is Mohammad Hossein-Zadeh Hejazi, who has an internal security background.
- IRGC and IRGC-QF leaders generally publicly acknowledge operations in support of regional allies,[13] although often characterizing Iran's support as humanitarian aid or protection for Shia religious shrines or sites. 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, and cruise missiles.[14]
- Iran has generally opposed Sunni terrorist groups that work against Iran's core interests, and it actively combatted the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. Iran has expelled some Al Qaeda activists who it 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. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo has linked Iran and Al Qaeda to a significant extent, 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."[15] 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."[16]

[10] The State Department "Country Reports on Terrorism for 2017" can be found at https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2017/index.htm.

[11] The other two countries still on the terrorism list are Syria and Sudan.

[12] DIA. Iran Military Power: 2019. Op.cit.

[13] *Al Jazeera*, August 20, 2016.

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

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

[16] 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.

The late IRGC-QF Commander Qasem Soleimani and his Successor

IRGC Major General Qasem Soleimani

Photo credit: http://akkasemosalman.ir

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. The division was deployed back to Soleimani's home province of Kerman after that war and was tasked with combating drug smugglers. He was still in that position when he was appointed as commander of the IRGC-QF in 1997. After 2001, when the Taliban was ousted by the U.S.-led military engagement in Afghanistan in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States, the IRGC-QF turned its attention to the broader Middle East region. 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 2, 2020, airstrike . The regime afforded him wide publicity inside Iran as an able strategist who combats Iran's adversaries from the front lines of regional conflicts.

In early January 2020 Supreme Leader Khamene'i announced that he was appointing deputy IRGC-QF commander, IRGC Brigadier General Esmail Qaani 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 has been 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. As was Soleimani, Qaani has been sanctioned by the United States under various Executive Orders. 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 seemingly prefers indirect action through proxies and armed factions it supports, but does sometimes undertake direct military action.
- Iran conducts, although less frequently than in 2017-2018, "high speed intercepts" of U.S. ships in the Persian Gulf. As noted in the "U.S.-Iran Conflict" CRS report referenced above, Iran has sometimes diverted or detained international shipping transiting the Gulf.
- In 2018, Iran has conducted missile strikes on regional opponents. In September, Iran fired missiles at a Kurdish opposition group based in northern Iraq. In early October, Iran fired, from Iranian territory, missiles at Islamic State positions in Syria.
- Since 2012, Iran has dedicated significant resources toward cyberespionage and has conducted cyberattacks against the United States and U.S. allies in the Persian Gulf. Government-supported Iranian hackers have conducted a series of cyberattacks against oil and gas companies in the Persian Gulf.[18]

[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] 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

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.[19] Iran also funds some Islamic charity organizations that operate in the region and represent an effort to build 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. One such program runs in Latin America, despite the small percentage of Muslims there.[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.

Table 1. Selected 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

[19] See, for example. http://www.newsweek.com/what-are-iranians-doing-iraq-303107. Also reported in author conversations with U.S. and Iraq and Afghan officials, 2009-2015.

[20] http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/oct/26/iran-cash-payments-to-afghanistan.

[21] http://www.crethiplethi.com/subversion-and-exporting-the-islamic-revolution-in-latin-america/islamic-countries/iran-islamic-countries/2012/.

Date	Incident/Event	Claimed/Likely Perpetrator
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: 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.

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 Iranian presidents travel outside Iran regularly, including to Europe and to U.N. meetings in New York. Khamene'i frequently hosts foreign leaders in Tehran.
- From August 2012 until August 2015, Iran held the presidency of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which has about 120 member states and 17 observer countries 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 their commitments, but the international community asserted that it did not meet all its obligations under them.
- Iran actively seeks to expand its participation in multilateral organizations. 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.
- Iran has participated in multilateral negotiations to try to resolve regional conflicts.

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 Program[22]

Iran's nuclear program has been a paramount U.S. concern, in part because Iran's acquisition of an operational nuclear weapon could cause Iran to perceive that it is immune from military pressure and produce a regional nuclear arms race. Some Iranian leaders argue that a nuclear weapon could reduce Iran's vulnerability to invasion, domination, or regime change attempts. In 2002, U.S. officials confirmed that Iran was building a uranium enrichment facility at Natanz and a heavy water production plant at Arak.[23] In 2010, Iran began enriching uranium to 20% purity, which requires most of the effort needed to produce "weapons-grade" uranium (90%+ purity). A nuclear weapon also requires a detonation mechanism.

The U.S. intelligence community has stated in recent years that it "does not know whether Iran will eventually decide to build nuclear weapons." Iranian leaders assert they never did and do not intend to develop a nuclear weapon, citing Supreme Leader Khamene'i's 2003 proclamation (*fatwa*) that nuclear weapons are un-Islamic and explaining that Iran's nuclear program is for medical and electricity generation purposes. Iran argues that uranium enrichment is its "right" as a party to the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and that it wants to make its own nuclear fuel to avoid potential supply disruptions. IAEA findings that Iran researched a nuclear explosive device—detailed in a December 2, 2015, International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report—cast doubt on Iran's assertions of purely peaceful intent, but there have been no assertions that Iran, at any time, diverted nuclear material for a weapons program.[24]

Nuclear Weapons Time Frame Estimates

In April 2015, then-Vice President Joseph Biden stated that Iran could produce enough fissile material for a nuclear weapon within two to three months of a decision to do so. U.S. officials said that the JCPOA increased the "breakout time"—an all-out effort by Iran to develop a nuclear weapon—to at least 12 months. In 2015, Iran had about 19,000 total installed centrifuges to enrich uranium, of which about 10,000 were operating. Prior to an interim nuclear agreement (Joint Plan of Action, JPA), Iran had a stockpile of 400 pounds of 20% enriched uranium (short of the 550 pounds that would be needed to produce one nuclear weapon).

Under the 2015 multilateral nuclear agreement (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA), Iran agreed, for at least ten years, to operate only about 5,000 centrifuges and to reduce its stockpile of 3.67% enriched uranium to 300 kilograms (660 pounds). Another means of acquiring fissile material for a nuclear weapon is to reprocess plutonium, a material that could be produced by Iran's heavy water plant at Arak. In accordance with the JCPOA, Iran rendered inactive the core of the reactor and it has limited its stockpile of heavy water.

[22] More extensive information on Iran's nuclear program can be found in CRS Report R43333, *Iran Nuclear Agreement and U.S. Exit*, by Paul K. Kerr and Kenneth Katzman.

[23] In November 2006, the IAEA, at U.S. urging, declined to provide technical assistance to the Arak facility on the grounds that it was likely for proliferation purposes.

[24] The February 25, 2011, IAEA report listed Iran's declared nuclear sites as well as a summary of all the NPT obligations Iran is not meeting. IAEA report of February 25, 2011.

The JCPOA does not prohibit civilian nuclear plants such as the one Russia built at Bushehr. Under a 1995 bilateral agreement, Russia supplies nuclear fuel for that plant and takes back the spent nuclear material for reprocessing. It became operational in 2012.

Diplomatic History of Addressing Iran's Nuclear Program

The JCPOA was the product of a long international diplomatic effort. In 2003, France, Britain, and Germany (the "EU-3") opened a diplomatic track to negotiate curbs on Iran's program, and in October 2003 they obtained an Iranian pledge, in return for receiving peaceful nuclear technology, to suspend uranium enrichment activities and sign and ratify the "Additional Protocol" to the NPT (allowing for enhanced inspections). Iran signed the Additional Protocol on December 18, 2003, although the *Majles* did not ratify it.

Iran ended the suspension after several months, but the EU-3 and Iran subsequently reached a November 14, 2004, "Paris Agreement," under which Iran suspended uranium enrichment in exchange for trade talks and other non-U.S. aid. The Bush Administration supported that agreement with a March 11, 2005, announcement withdrawing U.S. objections to Iran's applying to join the World Trade Organization (WTO). The agreement broke down in 2005 when Iran rejected an EU-3 proposal for a permanent nuclear accord as offering insufficient benefits. In August 2005, Iran began uranium "conversion" (one step before enrichment) at its Esfahan facility and, on February 4, 2006, the IAEA board voted 27-3[25] to refer the case to the Security Council. The Council set an April 29, 2006, deadline to cease enrichment.

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). The P5+1 offered Iran guaranteed Iran nuclear fuel for its civilian reactor (Annex I to Resolution 1747) but threatened sanctions if Iran did not agree.[26] The P5+1 negotiating position was strengthened, in part, by U.N. Security Council resolutions that imposed sanctions on Iran.

The Obama Administration and the JCPOA

The P5+1 met in February 2009 to incorporate the Obama Administration's stated commitment to direct U.S. engagement with Iran and,[27] in April 2009, U.S. officials announced that a U.S. diplomat would attend P5+1 meetings with Iran. In July 2009, the United States and its allies demanded that Iran offer constructive proposals by late September 2009 or face "crippling sanctions." A September 9, 2009, Iranian proposal led to an October 1, 2009, P5+1-Iran meeting in Geneva that produced a tentative agreement for Iran to allow Russia and France to reprocess 75% of Iran's low-enriched uranium stockpile for medical use. A draft agreement was approved by the P5+1 countries following technical talks in Vienna on October 19-21, 2009, but the Iranian leadership judged Iran's concessions as excessive and no accord was finalized.

In April 2010, Brazil and Turkey negotiated with Iran to revive the October arrangement. On May 17, 2010, the three countries signed a "Tehran Declaration" for Iran to send 2,600 pounds of low enriched uranium to Turkey in exchange for medically useful uranium.[28] Iran submitted to the IAEA an acceptance letter, but the Administration rejected the plan for failing to address

[25] Voting no: Cuba, Syria, Venezuela. Abstaining: Algeria, Belarus, Indonesia, Libya, South Africa.

[26] One source purports to have obtained the contents of the package from ABC News: http://www.basicint.org/pubs/Notes/BN060609.htm.

[27] Dempsey, Judy. "U.S. Urged to Talk With Iran." *International Herald Tribune*, February 5, 2009.

[28] Text of the pact is at http://www.cfr.org/publication/22140/.

enrichment to the 20% level. Immediately after the Brazil-Turkey mediation failed, the P5+1 agreed on a new U.N. Security Council resolution that would give U.S. allies authority to take substantial new economic measures against Iran. Adopted on June 9, 2010, Resolution 1929 linked Iran's economy to its nuclear capabilities and thereby authorized U.N. member states to sanction key Iranian economic sectors. An annex offered specific incentives to Iran if it ceased uranium enrichment and agreed to other nuclear limitations.[29]

Negotiations subsequent to the adoption of Resolution 1929—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 on a P5+1 proposals that Iran cease producing or stockpiling 20% enriched uranium and close the Fordow facility.

Interim and Comprehensive Nuclear Deals[30]

The June 2013 election of the relatively moderate Hassan Rouhani as Iran's president improved the prospects for a nuclear settlement, and the Supreme Leader affirmed Rouhani's authority to negotiate an accord in a speech on September 17, 2013, stating that he believes in the concept of "heroic flexibility"—adopting "proper and logical diplomatic moves.... "[31] Aided in part by private talks between U.S. and Iranian officials in Oman that began earlier in 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 eliminating its stockpile of 20% enriched uranium, ceasing to enrich to that level, and not increasing its stockpile of low enriched uranium.

P5+1-Iran negotiations on a comprehensive settlement began in February 2014. On April 2, 2015, the parties 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 and contains restrictions (less stringent than in Resolution 1929) on Iran's importation or exportation of conventional arms (for up to five years), and on development and testing of ballistic missiles capable of delivering a nuclear weapon (for up to eight years). Resolution 2231 superseded all previous Security Council resolutions on Iran. On January 16, 2016, the IAEA certified that Iran completed the work required for sanctions relief and "Implementation Day" was declared.

The Trump Administration and the Deterioration of the JCPOA

The Trump Administration criticized the JCPOA for not addressing 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.[32] In October 2017, the Administration withheld certification of Iranian compliance under the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act (INARA, P.L. 114-17) on the grounds that sanctions relief was not proportional to the limitations on Iran's nuclear program.

---

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

[30] For detail on these agreements, see CRS Report R43333, *Iran Nuclear Agreement and U.S. Exit*, by Paul K. Kerr and Kenneth Katzman.

[31] Open Source Center, "Iran: Leader Outlines Guard Corps Role, Talks of 'Heroic Flexibility,'" published September 18, 2013.

[32] Department of State. Press Briefing by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. August 1, 2017.

During late 2017-early 2018, the President threatened to withdraw the United States from the JCPOA unless Congress and the European countries acted to (1) extend the JCPOA's nuclear restrictions beyond current deadlines; (2) impose strict sanctions on Iran's development of ballistic missiles; (3) ensure that Iran allows "immediate" access to any site that the IAEA wants to visit; and (4) address Iran's "malign activities" in the region. On May 8, 2018, 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 taken further steps against Iran's nuclear program, including revoking waivers under U.S. law that enabled European and other countries to provide some forms of technical assistance to Iran's nuclear activities. Since late June 2019, Iran has "reduced compliance" with the JCPOA in five separate phases, causing the United Kingdom, France, and Germany to trigger the dispute resolution mechanism of the JCPOA—a process of arbitration of at least two months duration and that could lead to the snap back of all U.N. and EU sanctions on Iran.

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.

Missiles[33]

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."[34] The intelligence community has said publicly that Iran "can strike targets up to 2,000 kilometers from Iran's borders." Iran is not known to possess an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) capability (missiles of ranges over 2,900 miles), but U.S. officials assess that "Iran's work on a space launch vehicle (SLV)—including on its Simorgh—shortens the timeline to an ICBM because SLVs and ICBMs use similar technologies."[35]However, then-IRGC Commander-in-Chief Ali Jafari said in October 2017 that the existing ranges of Iran's missiles are "sufficient for now," suggesting that Iran has no plans to develop an ICBM.[36]

Iran appears to be emphasizing the development and the provision to its allies and proxies of short-range ballistic and cruise missiles because of the effectiveness of these weapons in enhancing Iran's ability 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)."[37] Iran's LACMs apparently were used in the September 14, 2019, attack on Saudi critical energy infrastructure, successfully avoiding U.S.-supplied air defenses and at least temporarily halting nearly half of Saudi oil production. 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

[33] For more information on Iran's missile arsenal, see CRS Report R42849, *Iran's Ballistic Missile and Space Launch Programs*, by Steven A. Hildreth.

[34] The report can be downloaded at https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2018/09/286216.htm.

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

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

[37] Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community. op cit.

years. As discussed below, during 2019 Israeli officials have explained strikes on Iranian installations in the region as intended to prevent the deployment by Iran's allies of missiles and rockets with greater precision than has been observed previously.

Iran's missile programs are run by the IRGC Aerospace Force, particularly the Al Ghadir Missile Command—an entity sanctioned under Executive Order 13382. 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). The wording is far less restrictive than that of Resolution 1929, which clearly prohibited Iran's development of ballistic missiles. The JCPOA itself does not specifically contain ballistic missile restraints. Iran has continued developing and testing missiles, despite Resolution 2231, which took effect on January 16, 2016, "Implementation Day."

- On October 11, 2015, and reportedly again on November 21, 2015, Iran tested a 1,200-mile-range ballistic missile, which U.S. intelligence officials called "more accurate" than previous Iranian missiles of similar range.
- Iran conducted ballistic missile tests on March 8-9, 2016—the first such tests after Implementation Day.
- Iran reportedly conducted a missile test in May 2016, although Iranian media had varying accounts of the range of the missile tested.
- A July 11-21, 2016, test of a missile of a range of 2,500 miles, akin to North Korea's Musudan missile, reportedly failed.[38]
- 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. On January 15, 2019, a *Simorgh* vehicle 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."
- In late August 2019, a pre-launch explosion of an Iranian rocket suggested that Iran's development of significant space vehicles continues to encounter problems.
- Iran continues to periodically test short-range ballistic missiles.

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

Iran asserts that conventionally armed missiles are an integral part of its defense strategy and they will not accept any new curbs on Iran's missile program. Iran argues that it is not developing a nuclear weapon and therefore is not designing its missile to carry a nuclear weapon. The Obama Administration termed Iran's post-Implementation Day ballistic missile tests as "provocative and destabilizing" and "inconsistent with" Resolution 2231. The Trump Administration termed Iran's July 27, 2017, space launch and its December 1, 2018, missile launch "violations" of the Resolution because of the inherent capability of the vehicle and the missile to carry a nuclear warhead. The U.N. Security Council has not imposed any additional sanctions on Iran for these

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

tests to date. A wide range of U.S. sanctions apply on Iran's missile program, as discussed in detail in: CRS Report RS20871, *Iran Sanctions*, by Kenneth Katzman.

Section 1226 of the FY2017 National Defense Authorization Act (S. 2943, P.L. 114-328) required the DNI, as well as the Secretary of State and the Secretary of the Treasury, to submit quarterly reports to Congress on Iranian missile launches in the preceding year, and on efforts to impose sanctions on entities assisting those launches. The provision expired on December 31, 2019.

U.S. and Other Missile Defenses

Successive U.S. Administrations have sought to build up regional missile defense systems. The United States and Israel have a broad program of cooperation on missile defense as well as on defenses against shorter-range rockets and missiles such as those Iran supplies to Lebanese Hezbollah (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. However, the September 14 attacks on Saudi energy infrastructure demonstrated weaknesses in the regional missile defense architecture. The United States has sought a defense against an eventual long-range Iranian missile system by emplacing missile defense systems in various Eastern European countries and on ship-based systems.

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 *Shahab-1* (Scud-b), *Shahab-2* (Scud-C), and *Tondar-69* (CSS-8) missiles; the Qiam (400-mile range), first tested in August 2010; the Fateh 110 and 313 and Hormuz solid fuel missiles and a related Khaliji Fars (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 (Noor, Ghadir, Nasr). 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 Meshkat, Soumar, and Hoveyzeh missiles, with Iran-claimed range 1,200 miles. Later versions based on the Soumar, reportedly used in the September 14 attacks on Saud Arabia, are named the Qods-I and Ya Ali, some of which may have been provided to the Houthis.
Anti-Tank Guided Missiles	Iran has developed the Toophan and Tosan anti-tank guided missile. Some have been seized in Houthi arms caches or in boats bound for delivery to the Houthis.

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.
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 Fajr rocket and has supplied it to Hezbollah, Hamas, and militants in Afghanistan. The Fajr 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 Safir-2 rocket (range about 155 miles), and a satellite carrying a small primate in December 2013. Iran launched the *Simorgh* space launch vehicle on July 27, 2017, and again on January 15, 2019, but the latter launch failed, according to Iranian officials.
Warheads	A *Wall Street Journal* 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.[39] No further information since.

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

Chemical and Biological Weapons[40]

Iran signed the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) on January 13, 1993, and ratified it on June 8, 1997. The U.S. statement to the November 22, 2018, CWC review conference said that "the United States has had long-standing concerns that Iran maintains a chemical weapons program that it failed to declare to the OPCW (Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons)." The statement specified that Iran failed to submit a complete chemical weapons production facility declaration; that Iran did not declare all of its riot control agents; and that Iran failed to declare its transfer of chemical weapons to Libya in the 1980s. The statement added that the United States could not certify that Iran does not maintain an undeclared CW stockpile.

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.

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.

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

[40] Information in this section is derived from the August 2018 Administration report to Congress under the Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act.

Conventional and "Asymmetric Warfare" Capability[41]

Iran appears to be able to defend against any conceivable aggression from Iran's neighbors, while lacking the ability to project conventional military power outside the region or across waterways. Iran's forces are widely assessed as incapable of defeating the United States in a classic military confrontation, but they are able to inflict significant damage or casualties on the U.S. military, as evidenced by Iran's retaliatory missile strike on Ayn Al Asad base in Iraq in January 2020.

Organizationally, Iran's armed forces are divided to perform functions appropriate to their roles. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC, known in Persian as the *Sepah-e-Pasdaran Enghelab Islami*)[42] controls the *Basij* (Mobilization of the Oppressed) volunteer militia that has been the main instrument to repress domestic dissent. The IRGC also has a national defense role. The IRGC and the regular military (*Artesh*)—the national army that existed under the former Shah—report to Supreme Leader Khamene'i 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 Kurdish insurgents and in the Iran-Iraq War. The appointment of an IRGC officer to head the joint headquarters again demonstrates the IRGC's dominance within Iran's military and security structure.

In April 2019, Khamene'i appointed a new IRGC Commander-in-Chief, IRGC Maj. Gen. Hossein Salami, to replace IRGC Maj. Gen. Mohammad Ali Jafari. Both are hardliners and IRGC operations and its political orientation are not expected to change. 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 role, even at times of heightened unrest.

Air Force Organization. The regular air force (Islamic Republic of Iran Air Force, IRIAF) operates most of Iran's traditional combat aircraft, whereas the IRGC Aerospace Force operates Iran's missile force and does not generally operate combat aircraft.

Naval Forces Organization. The IRGC Navy (IRGCN) and regular Navy (Islamic Republic of Iran Navy, IRIN) are distinct forces. As of 2007, the IRIN has responsibility for the Gulf of Oman and operates in deep waters in the region and beyond. 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 larger ships as well as its three Kilo-class submarines bought from Russia and the 14 North Korea-designed "Yona" (Ghadir, Iranian variant) midget subs, according to DOD reports. Iran is also developing increasingly lethal systems such as more advanced naval mines. Iran has a small number of warships on its Caspian Sea coast and, since 2014, Iran has periodically sent warships into the Atlantic Ocean to demonstrate growing naval capability.

Asymmetric Warfare Capacity

Iran compensates for its conventional military deficiencies by focusing on "asymmetric warfare." As an example, 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" U.S. naval assets with its

[41] 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.

[42] For a more extensive discussion of the IRGC, see Katzman, Kenneth, "The Warriors of Islam: Iran's Revolutionary Guard," *Westview Press*, 1993.

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. As discussed further later in this report, IRGC Navy vessels sometimes conduct "high-speed intercepts"—close-approaches of U.S. naval vessels in the Gulf.

Iran's arming of regional allies and proxies represents another aspect of Iran's development of asymmetric warfare capabilities. 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. For example, Iran's provision of anti-ship missiles to the Houthi rebels in Yemen could represent an effort by Tehran to project military power into the key Bab el-Mandeb Strait chokepoint. Iran can potentially direct Iran-supported forces in Afghanistan, Iraq, or Syria to try to attack U.S. personnel in those countries. Iran's agents and proxies also give Iran the potential to launch terrorist attacks inside the United States or throughout the region and the world.

Military-to-Military Relationships

Iran's armed forces have few formal relationships with foreign militaries outside the region. Iran's most significant military-to-military relationships have focused 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.[43] 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.[44] Iran and India have a "strategic dialogue" and some Iranian naval officers reportedly underwent some training in India in the 1990s—a timeframe during which Iran's military also conducted joint exercises with the Pakistani armed forces. Iran has signed at least basic—and in some cases more extensive—military cooperation agreements with Syria, Afghanistan, Sudan, Oman, Venezuela, Belarus, Russia, China, and South Africa.

The IRIN (regular navy) appears to be trying to expand Iran's relationships through naval port visits, including to China in 2013 and South Africa in 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,[45] 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 (arms on a U.N. Register of Conventional Arms) were banned by U.N. Resolution 1929. Resolution 2231, which supersedes Resolution 1929, requires

[43] 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.

[44] 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.

[45] Thomas Erdbrink and Chris Buckley. "China's Navy Sends Ships for Exercises with Iran." *New York Times*, September 22, 2014.

Security Council approval for any transfer of weapons or military technology, or related training or financial assistance, to Iran. The requirement extends for a maximum of five years from Adoption Day (until October 18, 2020). The Resolution named the systems subject to restriction:

> Battle tanks; armored combat vehicles; large caliber artillery systems; combat aircraft; attack helicopters; warships; missiles or missile systems, as defined by the U.N. Register of Conventional Arms, or related material, including spare parts ... and the provision to Iran ... of technical training, financial resources or services, advice, other services or assistance related to the supply, sale, transfer, manufacture, maintenance, or use of arms and related materiel....

Defense Minister Hossein Dehgan visited Moscow in February 2016, reportedly to discuss possible purchases of $8 billion worth of new conventional arms, including T-90 tanks, Su-30 aircraft, attack helicopters, anti-ship missiles, frigates, and submarines. Such purchases would require Security Council approval under Resolution 2231, and U.S. officials have said the United States would use its veto power to deny approval for the sale. Russia, in particular, can be expected to oppose any effort to extend the arms purchase restriction.

Resolution 2231 also requires Security Council approval for Iranian transfers of any weaponry outside Iran until October 18, 2020. 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, agreed on any punishments for these apparent violations.

Defense Budget

Iran's defense budget generally runs about 4% of GDP, but was higher (6%) in 2018. Iran's 2018-2019 defense budget was about $25 billion,[46] up from about $23 billion in 2017. These observations appear to support President Trump's 2018 assertion that Iran's defense budget had increased 40% since the JCPOA has been implemented. The Administration asserts that the reimposition of U.S. sanctions as of late 2018 has caused Iran's defense budget to shrink in the 2019-2020 Iranian budget year.[47] 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 reached about $100 billion in 2019.[48]

[46] https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-military-budget-irgc/28980550.html.

[47] Remarks by Ambassador Brian Hook, Special Adviser to the Secretary of State on Iran. Atlantic Council, July 17, 2019.

[48] "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 (not including internal security forces). Regular army ground force is about 350,000, Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) ground force is about 100,000. IRGC navy is about 20,000 and regular navy is about 18,000. Regular Air Force has about 30,000 personnel and IRGC Air Force (which runs Iran's missile programs) is of unknown size. IRGC-Qods Force numbers about 20,000. Security forces number about 40,000-60,000 law enforcement forces, and 100,000 Basij (volunteer militia under IRGC control) performing security dutes as well. Hundreds of thousands of additional Basij could be mobilized in the event of 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 advanced air to air and air to ground missiles (Yakhont anti-ship missile). Iran reportedly seeks to purchase Russia-made Mi-17 attack helicopters.
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 highly capable S-300 air defense system at an estimated cost of $800 million. Sale of the system did not technically violate U.N. Resolution 1929, because the system is not covered in the U.N. Registry on Conventional Arms, but Russia refused to deliver the system as long as that sanction remained in place. After the April 2, 2015, framework nuclear accord, Russia delivered the S-300 delivery and it is operational. Iran reportedly also seeks to buy Russia's S-400 anti-aircraft 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)—Section on Middle East and North Africa, and various press reports; testimony of then-CENTCOM Commander General Joseph Votel before the House Armed Services Committee on February 27, 2018.

Table 4. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)

The IRGC is generally loyal to Iran's political hardliners and is clearly more politically influential than is Iran's regular military, which is numerically larger, but was held over from the Shah's era. The IRGC's political influence has grown sharply as the regime has relied on it to suppress dissent. A Rand Corporation study 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 Rezai – 1981-1997; Rahim Safavi – 1997-2007; Mohamad Ali Jafari – 2007-2019; and Hossein Salami – 2019- present) have tended to be trusted confidants of the Supreme Leader and hardliners on foreign policy issues as well as against political dissent.

Militarily, the IRGC fields a ground force of about 100,000 for national defense. The IRGC Navy has responsibility to patrol the Strait of Hormuz and the regular Navy has responsibility for the broader Arabian Sea and Gulf of Oman (deeper waters further off the coast). The IRGC Air Force runs Iran's ballistic missile programs, but combat and support military aviation is operated exclusively by the regular Air Force, which has the required pilots and sustainment infrastructure for air force operations.

The IRGC is 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, as of 2008, has been integrated at the provincial level with the IRGC's provincial units. As of December 2016, the Basij is led by hardliner Gholam Hosein Gheibparvar. In November 2009, the regime gave the IRGC's intelligence units greater authority, surpassing that of the Ministry of Intelligence.

Through its Qods (Jerusalem) Force (QF), the IRGC has a foreign policy role in exerting influence throughout the region by supporting pro-Iranian movements and leaders. The IRGC-QF numbers approximately 5,000 personnel (according to the Defense Intelligence Agency) who provide advice, support, and arrange weapons deliveries to pro-Iranian factions or leaders in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Persian Gulf states, Gaza/West Bank, Afghanistan, and Central Asia. IRGC leaders have confirmed the QF is in Syria to assist the regime of Bashar al-Assad against an armed uprising, and it continues to support militias that exert political influence in Iraq in addition to combatting the Islamic State (also known as ISIS or ISIL). The IRGC-QF commander during 1988-1995 was Brigadier General Ahmad Vahidi, when the QF allegedly assisted Lebanese Hezbollah carry out two bombings of Israeli and Jewish targets in Buenos Aires (1992 and 1994) and later recruited Saudi Hezbollah activists accused of the June 1996 Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia. Section 1223 of the FY2016 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 114-92) required a DOD report on any U.S. military interaction with the IRGC-QF, presumably in Iraq.

As noted, the IRGC is also increasingly involved in Iran's economy, acting through a network of contracting businesses it has set up, most notably *Ghorb* (also called *Khatem ol-Anbiya*, Persian for "Seal of the Prophet"). 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 2009, the IRGC bought a 50% stake in Iran Telecommunication Company at a cost of $7.8 billion, although that firm was later privatized. Then-CIA Director Mike Pompeo estimated in 2017 that the IRGC affiliates might control about 20% of Iran's overall economy, but estimates vary widely and the actual figure is widely considered uncertain.

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—as depicted in CRS Report RS20871, *Iran Sanctions*. The United States did not remove any IRGC-related designations under the JCPOA, but the EU will be doing so in 2023. On April 15, 2019, the Trump Administration designated the IRGC as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). For information on that designation, see: CRS Insight IN11093, *Iran's Revolutionary Guard Named a Terrorist Organization*, by Kenneth Katzman.

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; Department of the Treasury; http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2013/09/30/130930fa_fact_filkins?printable=true&currentPage=all; https://www.defenddemocracy.org/content/uploads/documents/Transcript_FINAL_Pompeo.pdf.

Countering Iran

The Trump Administration has 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. As of January 2020, as evidenced by the 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), the Administration might also be adding offensive attacks on IRGC-QF commanders and their allies to the policy menu. Other elements of the strategy are discussed throughout this report.

The Administration has also articulated 12 specific demands for Iran to change its behavior in exchange for a new JCPOA and normalized relations with the United States. The demands pertaining to Iran's regional activities, as stipulated in the May 21, 2018, speech by Secretary of State Pompeo at the Heritage Foundation are that Iran[49]

- End support to Middle East terrorist groups, including Lebanese Hizballah, Hamas, and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad.
- 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 destructive cyberattacks.

The Administration has sought to build alliances of countries in and outside the region to counter Iran strategically. The United States works 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 Secretary of State Pompeo's trip to the GCC states, Iraq, Jordan, and Egypt in January 2019, as well as a ministerial meeting in Poland during February 13-14, 2019.[50] The Poland meeting has continued as a "Warsaw Process" to counter Iran's foreign and defense policies through working groups on maritime security, cybersecurity, and counter-terrorism.

Administration officials indicate that coalition-building is a main component of its strategy to counter Iranian attacks in the Persian Gulf since May 2019, including through the assembly of a multilateral coalition, coordinated by U.S. forces in the Gulf, that monitors Iranian naval

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

[50] "Pompeo Announces International Summit on Iran." Fox News, January 11, 2019; CRS In Focus IF11132, *Coalition-Building Against Iran*, by Kenneth Katzman.

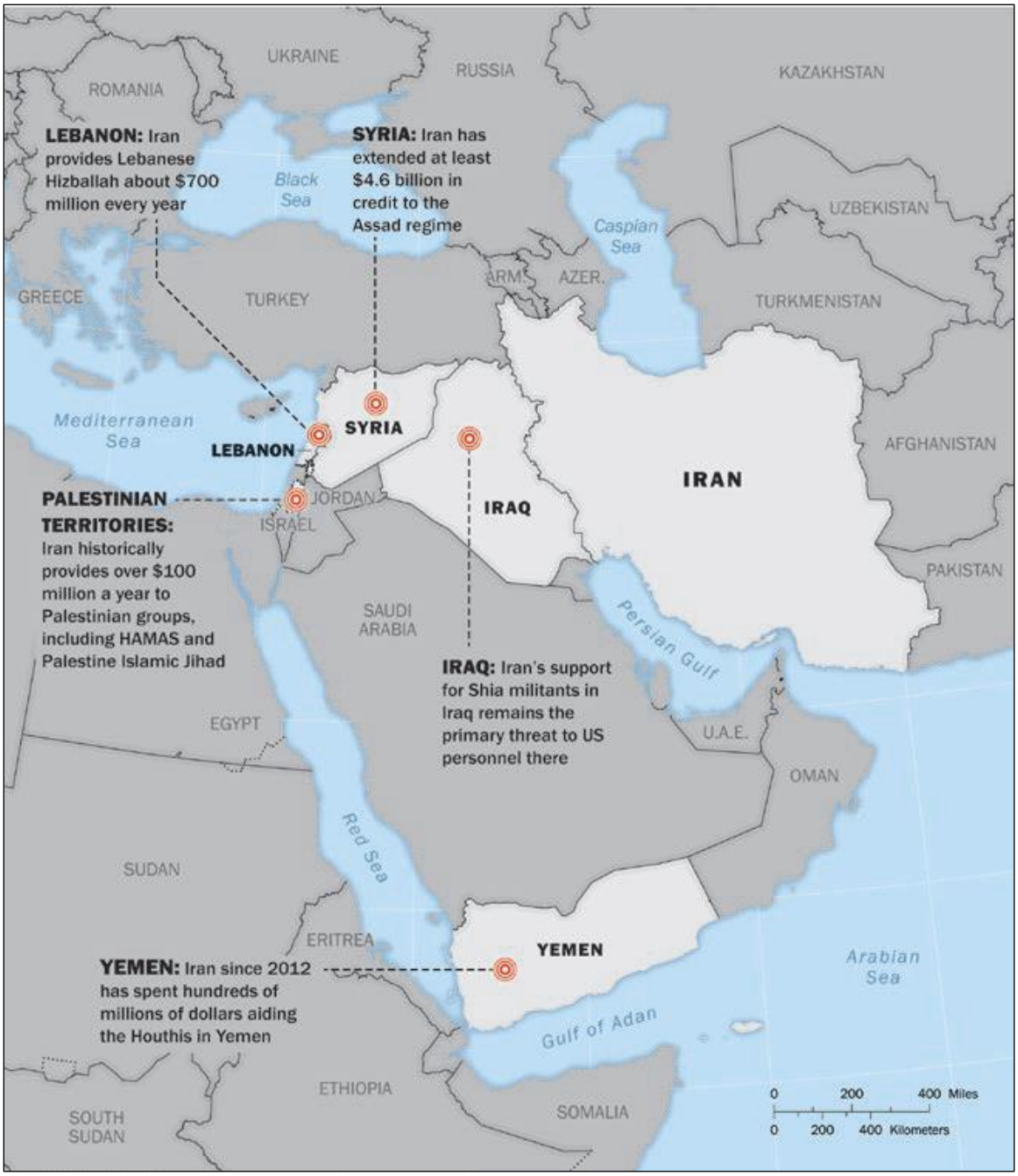
movements and presumably deters Iranian attacks.[51] In late August 2019, Defense Secretary Mark Esper declared the mission, known as the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC) as "up and running," and it was formally inaugurated in November 2019 in Bahrain. For information on the IMSC, see CRS Report R45795, *U.S.-Iran Conflict and Implications for U.S. Policy*, by Kenneth Katzman, Kathleen J. McInnis, and Clayton Thomas

Threatening Military Action

Administration officials, including President Trump, have threatened military retaliation for Iranian direct action. The escalation of U.S.-Iran tensions as of mid-2019 led to some U.S. military action, including the U.S. strike on IRGC-QF commander Soleimani and, a few days prior to that, U.S. strikes on the bases of an Iran-backed militia in Iraq. The FY2020 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 116-92) requires the Administration to provide information on efforts to deconflict with Iranian forces. See CRS Report R45795, *U.S.-Iran Conflict and Implications for U.S. Policy*, by Kenneth Katzman, Kathleen J. McInnis, and Clayton Thomas.

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

Figure 1. Iran's Regional Activities



Source: Taken from: State Department: "Outlaw Regime: Iran's Destructive Activities." 2018.

Notes: According to that report, 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

The focus of Iranian security policy is the Near East, where Iran employs all instruments of its national power, and successive Administrations have described many of Iran's regional activities as "malign." In addition to seeking to project power 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.

Iranian Funding to Allies and Proxies. A question that arises is the dollar value of material support that the IRGC-QF provides to Iran's allies and proxies. The State Department's 2018 report "Outlaw Regime: A Chronicle of Iran's Destructive Activities" 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, and information from U.S. government sources sometimes provides broad dollar figures without breakdowns or clear information on how those figures were derived. The FY2020 National Defense Authorization Act (S. 1790, P.L. 116-92) requires a Director National Intelligence report to Congress, within 180 days, on Iran's funding for regional armed factions and terrorist groups, and on 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 has a 1,100-mile coastline on the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman, and exerting dominance of the Gulf has always been a key focus of Iran's foreign policy, including during the reign of the Shah. In 1981, perceiving a 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 during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War and became formalized after the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. 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 and conducting operations against regional terrorist groups.

Figure 2. Map of Near East

Source: Created by CRS.

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 and, in a possible effort to ease heightened U.S.-Iran and Gulf-Iran tensions in mid-2019, the UAE and Saudi Arabia have conducted direct or sought indirect contact with Iran aimed at de-escalation. The long-standing assertions by Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman that the GCC states should engage Iran consistently contributed to a rift within the GCC in which Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Bahrain—joined by a few other Muslim countries—announced on June 5, 2017, an air,

land, and sea boycott of Qatar.[52] The rift has given Iran an opportunity to accomplish a long-standing goal of weakening the GCC.

Saudi Arabia[53]

Iranian and Saudi leaders accuse each other of seeking regional hegemony, and the two countries consistently have sought to weaken each other. The mutual animosity has aggravated regional sectarian tensions and caused escalations of the region's various conflicts.[54]

In 2015, Saudi Arabia led a coalition that intervened in Yemen's internal conflict in an effort to roll back Iranian influence by reducing the territory under the control of Houthi rebels there. Saudi Arabia, with corroboration from U.S. officials and a U.N. "panel of experts" on the Yemen conflict, has blamed Iran directly for supplying the Houthis with short-range ballistic missiles that the Houthis have been firing on the Kingdom. In 2017, Saudi leaders unsuccessfully sought to undermine Lebanese Hezbollah by pressuring Saudi ally and Lebanon Prime Minister Sa'd Hariri to expose Hezbollah's political influence in Lebanon. Saudi leaders publicly applauded the Trump Administration's May 2018 exit from the JCPOA and have supported U.S. efforts to deter Iranian actions in the Gulf, including Iran's attacks on commercial tankers in the Gulf in mid-2019. However, apparently assessing that the Trump Administration seeks to avoid conflict with Tehran, the Kingdom reportedly has been seeking indirect talks with Iran in an effort to ease tensions.[55]

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 an outspoken Shia cleric, Nimr Baqr al Nimr, alongside dozens of Al Qaeda members; all had been convicted of treason and/or terrorism charges. Subsequently, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain broke diplomatic relations with Iran, and Qatar, Kuwait, and UAE recalled 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 and accused it of sheltering the alleged mastermind of the bombing, Ahmad Mughassil.

United Arab Emirates (UAE)[56]

The UAE has generally been aligned with Saudi Arabia on Iran, including applauding the U.S. pullout from the JCPOA and combatting the Houthis in Yemen. 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

[52] The intra-GCC rift with Qatar has many antecedents beyond differences over Iran policy, as discussed in CRS Report R44533, *Qatar: Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy*, by Kenneth Katzman.

[53] 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.

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

[55] "Saudi Arabia and Iran Make Quiet Openings to Head Off War." New York Times, October 4, 2019.

[56] For detailed information on Iran-UAE relations, see CRS Report RS21852, *The United Arab Emirates (UAE): Issues for U.S. Policy*, by Kenneth Katzman.

countries since 2013. Despite their political and territorial differences, the UAE and Iran maintain extensive trade and commercial ties. 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 bilaterally. (ICJ referral requires concurrence from both parties to a dispute.) In 2013-2014, the two countries held direct apparently productive discussions on the issue and Iran reportedly removed some military equipment from the islands.[57] No further progress has been made public.

Qatar[58]

Since 1995, Qatar has advocated engagement with Iran, and Qatar's leadership has sought to de-escalate U.S.-Iran tensions, including during a January 2020 visit to Iran by Qatar's Amir Tamim Al Thani. The speaker of Iran's *Majles* (parliament) visited Qatar in March 2015 and the Qatari government allowed him to meet with Hamas leaders in exile there. Still, Qatar provided arms and funds to factions in Syria opposed to key Iranian ally Syrian President Bashar Al Asad and—until the 2017 rift with Saudi Arabia and the UAE—Qatar was part of the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen. Qatar withdrew its Ambassador from Iran in connection with the Nimr execution discussed above, but restored relations in August 2017 to reciprocate Iran's support for Qatar in the intra-GCC rift. Iran has increased its food exports to Qatar as an alternative to 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, but 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). In April 2004, the Iran's then-deputy oil minister said that Qatar is probably producing more gas than "her right share" from the field.

Bahrain[59]

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.[60]On several occasions, 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. Bahrain last broke ties with Iran in concert with Saudi Arabia in January 2016. As did Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Bahrain supported the Trump Administration's withdrawal from JCPOA. In 1981 and

[57] http://archive.defensenews.com/article/20140115/DEFREG04/301150034/Source-UAE-Iran-Reach-Accord-Disputed-Hormuz-Islands.

[58] For detailed information on Iran-Qatar relations, see CRS Report R44533, *Qatar: Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy*, by Kenneth Katzman.

[59] For detailed information on Iran-Bahrain relations, see CRS Report 95-1013, *Bahrain: Unrest, Security, and U.S. Policy*, by Kenneth Katzman.

[60] http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/01/bahrain-accuses-iran-training-rebels-201413144049814960.html.

again in 1996, Bahrain publicly claimed to have thwarted Iran-backed efforts by Bahraini Shia dissidents to violently overthrow the ruling family.

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.[61] Bahrain has periodically arrested persons for allegedly helping the IRGC-QF.

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.[62] In July 2018, the State Department named the Al Ashtar Brigades as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO), based on State Department assertions that

> Iran has provided weapons, funding, and training to Bahraini militant Shia groups that have conducted attacks on the Bahraini security forces. On January 6, 2016, Bahraini security officials dismantled a terrorist cell, linked to IRGC-QF, planning to carry out a series of bombings throughout the country.

Tensions also have flared occasionally over Iranian attempts to question the legitimacy of a 1970 U.N.-run referendum in which Bahrainis chose independence rather than affiliation with Iran. In March 2016, a former IRGC senior commander and adviser to Supreme Leader Khamene'i reignited the issue by saying that Bahrain is an Iranian province and should be annexed.[63]

Kuwait[64]

Kuwait is differentiated from some of the other GCC states by its integration of Shias into the political process and the economy. About 25% of Kuwaitis are Shia Muslims, but Shias have not been restive there and Iran was not able to mobilize Kuwaiti Shias to end Kuwait's support for the Iraqi war effort in the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). 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. However, it also has tried to mediate a settlement of the Yemen conflict and broker GCC-Iran rapprochement, and Kuwait's government did not fund or arm any Syrian opposition groups.

An advocate of engagement with Tehran, Kuwait exchanges leadership-level visits with Iran; Kuwait's 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. However, on numerous occasions, Kuwaiti courts have convicted Kuwaitis with spying for the IRGC-QF or Iranian intelligence. Kuwait recalled its Ambassador from Iran in connection with the Saudi-Iran Al Nimr dispute.

---

[61] Souad Mekhennet and Joby Warrick. "In Bahrain's Militant Cells, U.S. Sees Iran." *Washington Post*, April 2, 2017.

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

[63] Gam News, Iran, as reported by Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), March 17, 2016.

[64] For detailed information on Iran-Kuwait relations, see CRS Report RS21513, *Kuwait: Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy*, by Kenneth Katzman.

Oman[65]

Oman's leadership has engaged Iran's leadership more consistently than any of the Gulf states, and this stance is not expected to change after the January 2020 death of longtime Omani Sultan Qaboos bin Sa'id Al Said and his replacement by Haythim bin Tariq Al Said. Omani leaders have long expressed gratitude for 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.[66] 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, which is emerging as a significant trading and transportation outlet. 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 is curtailing Oman's future storage of that Iranian product.

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, in the past two years, they have succeeded in blocking Iran from smuggling weaponry to the Houthis via Oman.[67]

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 Persian Gulf, which is only about 20 miles wide at its narrowest point. Each day, about 17 million barrels of oil flow through the Strait, which is 20% of all worldwide traded oil.[68]

For several decades, U.S. and GCC officials have viewed Iran as posing a possible threat to the Strait and the Gulf, potentially using the naval, missile, mine, and other assets. In mid-2015, Iran stopped several commercial ships transiting the strait as part of an effort to resolve commercial disputes with the shipping companies involved. In 2018, Iran's President Rouhani as well as IRGC Navy commander Alireza Tangsiri threatened the free flow of oil in the Gulf should the Trump Administration succeed in compelling Iran's oil customers to cease buying Iranian oil entirely. After the United States ended sanctions exceptions for the purchase of Iranian oil in May 2019, Iran sought to implement that threat by attacking several Saudi, UAE and other tankers in the Gulf, and through the September 14 missile attack on Saudi critical energy infrastructure.[69]

Prior to the heightened U.S.-Iran tensions of mid-2019, Iran had challenged U.S. forces in the Gulf, perhaps in part to demonstrate that it is not intimidated by U.S. power. During 2016-2017, according to then-DNI Coats, about 10% of U.S. Navy interactions with the IRGC-Navy were "unsafe, abnormal, or unprofessional" as 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.

---

[65] For detailed information on Iran-Oman relations, see CRS Report RS21534, *Oman: Politics, Security, and U.S. Policy*, by Kenneth Katzman.

[66] As reported in author conversations in Oman and with Omani officials, 1988-2015.

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

[68] http://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.cfm?id=18991.

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

During some of these incidents, U.S. vessels fired warning shots at approaching Iranian naval craft.

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 discussed below. 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 GCC concerns that the United States might reduce its commitment to Gulf security and President Obama and the GCC leaders held two summit meetings—in May 2015 and April 2016—to reassure the GCC of U.S. support against Iran. The summit meetings produced announcements of a U.S.-GCC strategic partnership and specific commitments 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.[70] Perhaps indicating reassurance, the GCC states expressed support for the JCPOA.[71] Yet, the GCC states have backed the Trump Administration's characterization of Iran as a major regional threat and applauded the related relaxation of restrictions on arms sales to the GCC states and downplaying of concerns about GCC human rights practices.

Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA).[72] The Trump Administration reportedly is attempting to build 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 a planned U.S.-GCC summit but, because of the ongoing intra-GCC dispute and other factors, the meeting has been repeatedly postponed and no date has been announced.[73] The Saudi killing of U.S.-based Saudi journalist Jamal Kashoggi, which has brought widespread international and congressional criticism of the Kingdom and Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman Al Saud, further clouds prospects for another U.S.-GCC summit. The establishment of a MESA was a significant element of Secretary of State Pompeo's trip to the GCC states in January 2019, but the concept suffered a setback in April 2019 when Egypt announced it would not participate in the MESA grouping. The Administration held a series of MESA-related meetings with visiting GCC officials on the concept in the wake of the September 14, 2019, attacks on Saudi Arabia, but differences among the GCC states reportedly continues to delay the formal institution of the pact.

[70] https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/05/14/annex-us-gulf-cooperation-council-camp-david-joint-statement.

[71] State Department, Joint Statement of the U.S.-GCC Foreign Ministers Meeting. August 3, 2015; https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/04/joint-statement-meeting-between-president-barack-obama-and-king-salman.

[72] 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.

[73] Jack Detsch. "Trump Shelves Gulf Talks until Next Year." Al Monitor, September 6, 2018.

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. There are about more than 35,000 U.S. forces stationed at GCC 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.[74] There has been an increase of several thousand U.S. forces in the Gulf, mainly in missile and other defensive roles, in concert with the heightened tensions with Iran since May 2019.

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, for consultations in the event of a major threat to the state in question.[75] 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. 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 to prevent infiltration by the IRGC-QF.

Arms Sales. U.S. arms sales to the GCC countries have improved GCC air and naval capabilities and their interoperability with U.S. forces. 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. However, congressional and administration support for some arms sales has been reduced in recent years by the Bahrain government crackdown on the 2011 uprising there, the intra-GCC rift, and the Saudi/UAE-led war in Yemen.

The following sections discuss specific U.S.-Gulf defense relationships.[76]

- *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, the Administration cited emergency authority to make additional sales to Saudi Arabia, prompting congressional criticism of the sales as well as of the Administration use of emergency authority. In concert with escalated tensions with Iran in mid-2019, several thousand U.S. forces have deployed to Prince Sultan Air Base south of Riyadh, which had not been used by U.S. forces since 2003. 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 over 15,000 mostly U.S. Army personnel are stationed there, including ground combat

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

[75] 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 http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/pub185.pdf. 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.

[76] 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.

troops. Kuwait has hosted the U.S.-led headquarters for Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR), the military component of the campaign against the Islamic State. 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 forward headquarters of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), which has responsibility for the Middle East and Central Asia; a Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC) that oversees U.S. combat aircraft missions in the region; the large Al Udeid Air Base; and the *As Saliyah* army pre-positioning site where U.S. armor is pre-positioned.[77] 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 on June 14, 2017. Qatar and the United States signed an agreement in early 2019 under which Qatar commits to expand Al Udeid air base and build fixed housing and other facilities there.
- *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.[78] About 4,000 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 and contract ships at the large commercial port of Jebel Ali. 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 the country has bought in recent years. The UAE has stated 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 indicated that the potential sale would be evaluated in accordance with U.S. policy to maintain Israel's Qualitative Military Edge (QME). 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.-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

[77] 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/.

[78] 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/.

finalize a sale of additional F-16s unless the government demonstrates progress on human rights issues, but the Trump Administration dropped that condition.

- *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 or virtually no 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. Bahrain and Oman have, in recent years, received a few 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, counternarcotics, and border and maritime security programs.

Figure 3. U.S. CENTCOM Regional Presence

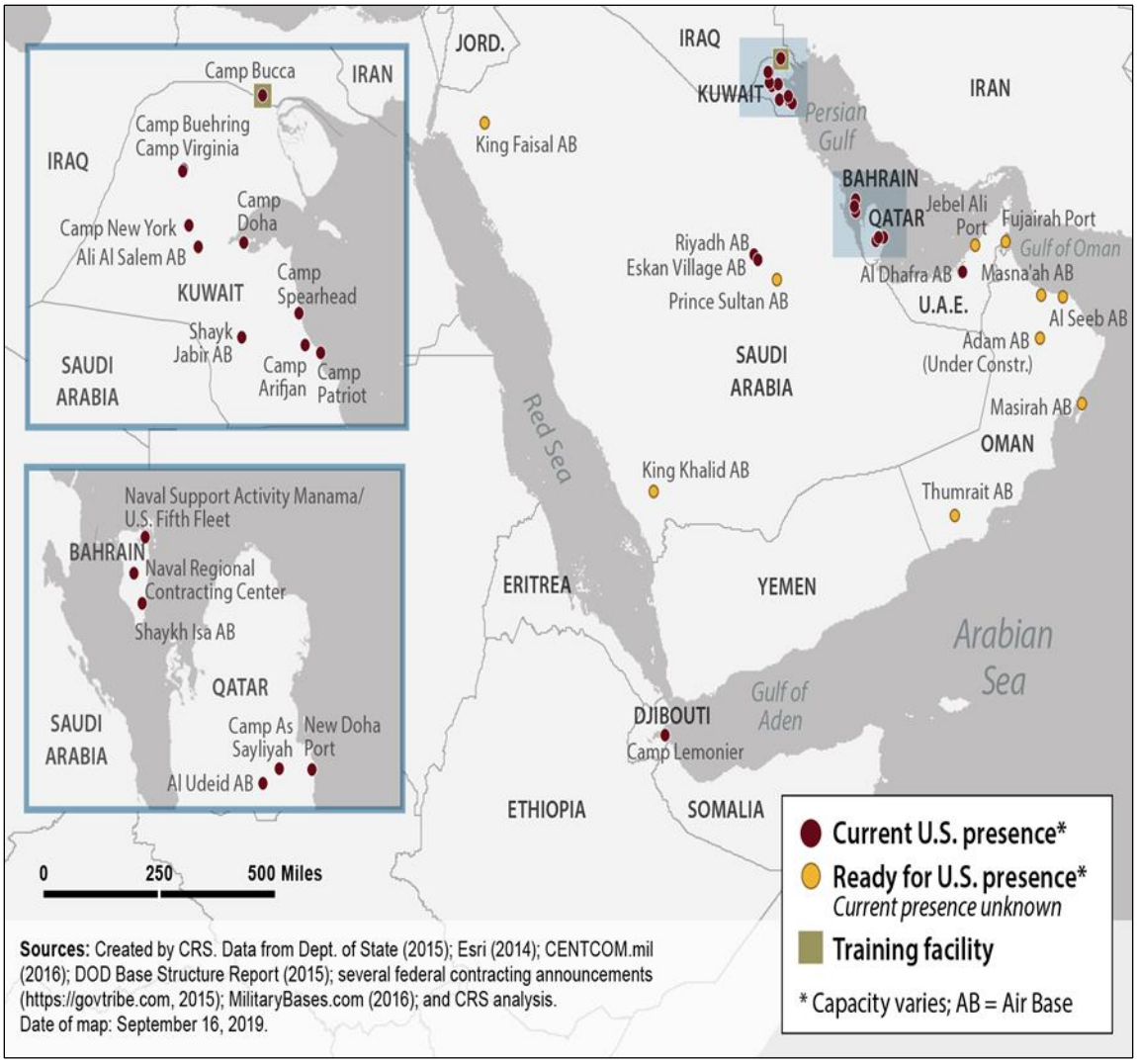


Table 5. Military Assets of the Gulf Cooperation Council Member States

	Bahrain	Kuwait	Oman	Qatar	Saudi Arabia	UAE
Total Manpower	8,200+	15,500+	42,600+	11,800	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	—

	Bahrain	Kuwait	Oman	Qatar	Saudi Arabia	UAE
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*, 2019, 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 State[79]

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. Iran faced a significant challenge and uprising in Syria that began in 2011 and the Islamic State organization's capture of significant territory in Iraq in 2014. These challenges have been beaten back not only by Iranian intervention but also by U.S. intervention in Iraq and Russian intervention in Syria.

[79] For information, see CRS Report R43612, *The Islamic State and U.S. Policy*, by Christopher M. Blanchard and Carla E. Humud.

Iraq

The U.S. military ousting of Saddam Hussein in 2003 removed Iran's main regional adversary and produced governments led by Shia Islamists who seek positive relations with Iran.[80] Iran is able to wield substantial influence on Iraq not only through these relationships but because 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. Estimates of the total Shia militiamen in Iraq number about 110,000-120,000, of which at least half might be members of Iran-backed militias.[81] Collectively, all of the militias are known as Popular Mobilization Forces or Units (PMFs or PMUs). During the 2003-2011 U.S. intervention in Iraq, Iran gave various militias rocket-propelled munitions, such as Improvised Rocket Assisted Munitions (IRAMs), contributing to the deaths of about over 600 U.S. military personnel during those years.[82] In August 2018, there were unconfirmed reports that Iran had transferred short-range ballistic missiles to some of its Shia militia allies in Iraq, possibly for the purpose or projecting force further into the region.[83]

Iran's advice and support to Shia militas also contributed to the outbreak of some hostilities between Iran and the United States, as the Trump Administration retaliated for Iran-backed militia attacks on Iraqi bases and the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad. Iranian civilian and IRGC leaders have said that a main element of Iran's retaliation for the January 2, 2020, U.S. strike that killed IRGC-QF commander Soleimani , beyond the retaliatory missile strike on Ayn Al Asad base, will be to achieve the ouster of the approximately 5,200 U.S. forces in Iraq. For more information, see CRS Report R45633, *Iraq: Issues in the 116th Congress*, by Christopher M. Blanchard.

At the same time, Iran seeks to prevent the revival of the Islamic State organization there, which at one point brought Islamic State forces to within 50 miles of the Iranian border. That challenge triggered Iran to furnish Baghdad and the *peshmerga* forces of the autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) with IRGC-QF advisers, drones, weapons, and other direct military assistance.[84]Iranian leaders also have acceded to the selection of Iraqi leaders who are inclusive of Sunni leaders,[85] while at the same time reportedly funding Iraqi candidates who support close relations with Iran.

Iran also exercises soft power in Iraq. It is the main supplier of natural gas that Iraq needs to operate its electricity plants. To demonstrate Iran's interest in the Iraq relationship, President Rouhani conducted an official visit to Iraq in March 2019, during which agreements were signed for a new rail link and other new economic linkages. Rouhani was received in Najaf by the revered Iraqi Shia leader Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani—the only Iranian president the reclusive figure has received. Sistani reportedly urged Iran to respect Iraq's sovereignty—a veiled criticism of the IRGC-QF's emphasis on supporting Iraqi militias.[86]At the same time, Iran reportedly has been seeking to increase its sway over the Shia religious leadership in Iraq.[87]

---

[80] Michael Gordon, "Iran Supplying Syrian Military Via Iraqi Airspace," *New York Times,* September 5, 2012.

[81] http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2016/08/16/us-officials-up-to-100000-iran-backed-fighters-now-in-iraq.html.

[82] U.S. State Department Iran officials press briefing. April 2019.

[83] "Exclusive: Iran Moves Missile to Iraq in Warning to Enemies." *Reuters,* August 31, 2018.

[84] "Iran News Agency Reports Death of Iranian Pilot in Iraq." Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. July 5, 2014.

[85] Babak Dehghanpisheh. "Iran Dramatically Shifts Iraq Policy to Confront Islamic State." *Reuters,* September 2, 2014.

[86] By Granting Rare Audience, Iraq's Grand Ayatollah Sends Message to Washington and Tehran. *Washington Post,* March 14, 2019.

[87] "Iran's Spiritual Power Play." *Washington Post,* May 5, 2019.

The most powerful Iran-backed militias, including Asa'ib Ahl Al Haq (AAH) the Badr Organization, and Kata'ib Hezbollah, 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 in the 1980s and 1990s, and they have advocated reduced reliance on the United States.

Despite good relations with the Iraqi Kurdish political leadership, Iran, as does the United States, supports the territorial integrity of Iraq and opposed the September 25, 2017, KRG referendum on independence. At the same time, Iran is wary of the ability of some anti-Iran government Kurdish movements to operate in northern Iraq. In September 2018, Iran fired seven 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. The KDP-I's Secretary General and other figures of the group were reportedly among those wounded.[88]

Iranian Advice and Funding to Iraqi Militias

The number of IRGC-QF personnel in Iraq advising Iran-backed militias or the Iraqi government is not known from published sources. It is likely that there are far fewer IRGC-QF personnel in Iraq than there were at the height of the Islamic State challenge to Iraq in 2014. In 2014, a senior Iranian cleric estimated the dollar value of Iran's assistance to Iraq at about $1 billion—a large increase over an estimated baseline level of about $150 million per year.[89]

Some Major Iran-Backed Militias and Their Offshoots

Some Iran-backed militias are offshoots of the "Mahdi Army" militia that Shia cleric Moqtada Al Sadr formed in 2004 to combat the U.S. military presence in Iraq.

- *Kata'ib Hezbollah*. One Mahdi Army offshoot, Kata'ib Hezbollah (KAH), 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 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 2, 2020, was a Da'wa party operative during Saddam's rule, and was convicted in absentia by Kuwaiti courts for the Da'wa assassination attempt on the ruler of Kuwait in May 1985 and the 1983 Da'wa bombings of the U.S. and French embassies there. He later joined the Badr Corps of the IRGC-backed Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), but broke with the group in 2003 because of its support for the U.S. invasion of Iraq. He was in the Mahdi Army during 2003-2006.
- *Asa'ib Ahl Al Haq*. Asa'ib Ahl Al Haq (AAH) leader Qais al-Khazali headed the Mahdi Army "Special Groups" breakaway faction during 2006-2007, until his capture by U.S. forces for his alleged role in a 2005 raid that killed five American soldiers. During his imprisonment, his followers formed AAH. After his release in 2010, Khazali took refuge in Iran, returning in 2011 to take resume command of AAH while also participating in the political process. AAH mobilized to fight the 2014 Islamic State offensive. Khazali is an elected member of Iraq's national assembly. AAH was named as an FTO in January 2020.

[88] https://www.apnews.com/39a6e79233574b0fb8ef2a794625ed33.

[89] "Iran Dramatically Shifts Iraq Policy to Confront Islamic State." Reuters, September 2, 2014.

- *Badr Organization*. The Badr Organization, the armed wing of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI, formerly SCIRI), the mainstream Shia party headed now by Ammar al-Hakim, 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 its failed efforts to overthrow Saddam during the 1980s and 1990s. The forces disarmed after Saddam's fall and integrated into the political process. 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 election.
- *Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba.* This militia, led by Shaykh Akram al-Ka'bi, formed in 2013 to assist the Asad regime in Syria. The group increased its presence at Aleppo in 2016 to help the Asad regime recapture that city. 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 who are well-disposed to the United States and relatively nonsectarian, and insisting that they deploy Iraqi security forces to prevent Iran-backed militias from threatening U.S. forces or installations. The Trump Administration reportedly has worked with the Iraqi government, with mixed success to date, to try to integrate all the militias into the official command structure. The current president and prime minister, Barham Salih and Adel Abdul Mahdi, respectively, are well known to U.S. officials and have—until the U.S. strike on Qasem Soleimani—publicly favored continued U.S. involvement in Iraq. As U.S.-Iran conflict has taken place in Iraq, these leaders have insisted that the United States not violate Iraqi sovereignty by taking military action against Iran inside Iraq. These leaders are seeking to balance relations with the United States while facing substantial political pressure from Iran's allies and proxies inside Iraq to expel U.S. forces from Iraq. In 2014, U.S. officials initially refused to support Iraqi Shia militias in the anti-Islamic State effort, but they later supported those PMFs identified as not backed by Iran.

The United States has pressed Iraq to comply with reimposed U.S. sanctions on Iran by ceasing oil swaps with Iran and ceasing energy transactions with Iran. However, Iraqi leaders have resisted U.S. pressure to break decisively with Iran and, in deference to that sentiment, the United States has provided successive 90-day waivers of the Iran Freedom and Counter-proliferation Act (P.L. 112-239) to permit Iraq to continue buying Iranian natural gas that feeds its power plants until it can line up alternative gas sources. Several Iranian and Iran-linked entities and persons have been sanctioned under Executive Order 12438, which blocks property and prevents U.S. visas for persons determined to threaten stabilization efforts in Iraq. 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 requires sanctions on Iran-backed militias or other entities determined to be destabilizing Iraq. On the other hand, these organizations are believed to have virtually no U.S.-based assets or financial interests that could be impounded.

Syria[90]

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 an ally of Iran in a region where most governments oppose the Islamic Republic; and (3) might be replaced by a government hostile to Iran if he 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 to Asad persists. Several high-ranking IRGC commanders have died in Syria and their deaths have been portrayed by the regime as heroic sacrifices on behalf of the Iranian revolution and Iran's national interests.[91] In 2018, Iran and Syria signed updated military cooperation agreements.

Iran's extensive involvement in Syria has alarmed Israeli leaders, who now apparently perceive Iran as using Syrian territory to exert greater leverage against Israel—adding to the threat posed by Hezbollah on Israel's northern border. Israel accuses Iran of constructing bases in Syria, including rocket and missile factories that can safely supply Hezbollah. Israel has conducted relatively frequent strikes on such targets in Syria. For additional information on the threat to Israel posed by Iran's presence in Syria, see CRS In Focus IF10858, *Iran and Israel: Tension Over Syria*, by Carla E. Humud, Kenneth Katzman, and Jim Zanotti.

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. However, Russia's intervention in Syria created the potential for Iran to achieve its maximum goals in Syria, and since 2016, Iran has pursued those goals in negotiations brokered by Russia and Turkey ("Astana Process").

Iranian Military and Financial Support to Asad

Iranian support to Asad against the rebellion is 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 ranges:

- *Iranian Military Personnel.* After 2012, Iran expanded its intervention to the point where regional security sources estimated that, by late 2015, it was deploying nearly 2,000 military personnel in Syria, including IRGC-QF, IRGC ground force, and even some regular army special forces personnel.[92] The regular military has not deployed beyond Iran's borders since the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War. The current size of the Iranian force in Syria has not been publicized.

[90] 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.

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

[92] Dan Williams. "Israel Says 55 Iranians Killed in Syria's War." *Reuters*, November 19, 2015; American Enterprise News Round Up. April 4, 2016; FY2016 DOD report on the military power of Iran, released January 2017 (unclassified summary).

- *Hezbollah Fighters*. Many different sources converge on a figure of about 7,000 Lebanese Hezbollah fighters deployed to Syria to assist the Syrian military. 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.[93] These figures include not only Lebanese Hezbollah fighters but also Iraqi militias such as Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, 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 top Iran policy official, 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."[94]
- *Financial Support.* Estimates of Iran's spending to support Asad's effort against the rebellion vary widely. The State Department's "Outlaw Regime" report (graphic, page 11), referenced above, indicate that Iran has extended "at least $4.6 billion in credit to the Assad regime" since 2012. The aid includes gratis oil and commodity transfers, and munitions supplies 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."[95] 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 the Administration has supported Israeli strikes on Iranian positions in Syria that are part of Israel's effort to deny Iran an extensive military infrastructure there.

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 addition, in mid-2019, the United States imposed sanctions on Iranian ships and shipping facilitators involved in Iranian oil shipments to Syria, particularly in conjunction with an Iranian ship held by Gibraltar during July-August 2019 for allegedly attempting to deliver oil to Syria in violation of EU sanctions against Syria.

Hamas, Hezbollah, and other Anti-Israel Groups[96]

It can be argued that a significant component of Iran's policy is to use its allies and proxies to pressure Israel strategically. Iran's leaders assert that Israel is an illegitimate creation of the West

[93] 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.

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

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

[96] For more information, see CRS Report R41514, *Hamas: Background and Issues for Congress*, by Jim Zanotti, and CRS Report RL33476, *Israel: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

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 September 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.[97] These statements underpin Israeli assertions that a nuclear-armed Iran would be an "existential threat" to Israel.

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 leaders assert that Israel's purported nuclear arsenal is a main obstacle to establishing a weapons-of-mass-destruction (WMD) free zone in the Middle East.

Iran materially supports nonstate actors such as Hamas and Hezbollah that have undertaken armed action against Israel, possibly as an attempt to apply pressure to Israel to compel it to make concessions. Alternately, Iran might be attempting to disrupt prosperity, morale, and perceptions of security among Israel's population. For more than two decades, the annual State Department report on international terrorism has asserted that Iran provides funding, weapons (including advanced rockets), and training to a variety of U.S.-designated FTOs, including Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad—Shiqaqi Faction (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).

Israel and the Obama Administration disagreed over the JCPOA—Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called it a "historic mistake." Netanyahu's policy preference was adopted when the Trump Administration exited the JCPOA. Israel retains the option of a military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities should Iran again advanced toward a capability to produce a nuclear weapon, although its lack of strategic bombers easily able to reach Iran could present logistical challenges. Israel has admitted to conducting periodic strikes against Iranian weapons-related sites in Lebanon, and it reportedly conducted at least one strike in Iraq as well in 2019. Israeli officials assert that Iran is using sites in Lebanon to develop and transfer equipment to its allies and proxies designed to increase the precision of Iran-supplied missiles and rockets.[98]

Hamas[99]

U.S. officials assert that Iran gives funds, weapons, and training to Hamas, which seized control of the Gaza Strip in 2007 and has administered that territory but since has ceded formal authority over Gaza to the Palestinian Authority (PA). 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 conflicts with Israel since 2008, the latest of which was in 2014, and in periodic smaller scale rocket attacks. Some observers maintain that Iran might be trying to build up Hamas' influence in the West Bank.

In 2012, their differing positions 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

[97] http://www.cnn.com/2015/09/10/middleeast/iran-khamenei-israel-will-not-exist-25-years/.

[98] 'Watch out': In tacit threat, IDF reveals details of Iran-Hezbollah missile plot. Times of Israel, August 19, 2019.

[99] For more information, see CRS Report RL34074, *The Palestinians: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

rebellion militarily. Iran reduced its support to Hamas in its brief 2014 conflict with Israel as compared to 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.[100] Hamas and Iran formally restored their relations in October 2017.

Iranian Financial Support to Hamas

Iran's support to Hamas has been estimated to be as high as $300 million per year (funds and in-kind support, including weapons) during periods of substantial Iran-Hamas collaboration,[101]but is widely assessed at a baseline amount in the tens of millions per year. The State Department's September 2018 "Outlaw Regime" report states 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, which Iranian leaders portray as successful "exportation" of Iran's Islamic revolution, 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.[102] State Department reports on international terrorism state that "the group generally follows the religious guidance of the Iranian Supreme Leader, which [is] [Grand Ayatollah] Ali Khamenei."[103]

Iran's close relationship to the group began when Lebanese Shia clerics of the pro-Iranian 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 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. Hezbollah fired Iranian-supplied rockets on Israel's northern towns and cities during the July-August 2006 war with Israel, and in July 2006 Hezbollah damaged an Israeli warship with a C-802 anti-ship missile of the type that Iran reportedly bought in significant quantity from China in the 1990s. Hezbollah's leadership asserted that it was victorious in that war for holding out against Israel.[104]

Illustrating the degree to which Iranian assistance has helped Hezbollah become a potential global terrorism threat, the State Department Coordinator for Counterterrorism said on November 13, 2018, that "Hezbollah's ambitions and global reach rival those of Al Qaeda and ISIS." 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, including the selection of a new Prime Minister in late 2019.

---

[100] Stuart Winer. "Iran Boasts of Rocket Aid to Palestinians, Hezbollah." *The Times of Israel*, February 3, 2015; and, http://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-rekindles-relations-with-hamas-1429658562.

[101] Robert Tait, "Iran Cuts Hamas Funding Over Syria." *Telegraph*, May 31, 2013.

[102] See Ben Hubbard. "Hezbollah Wields Rising Power as Iran's Enforcer." *New York Times*, August 28, 2017.

[103] Department of State. Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism. Country Reports on Terrorism: 2016.

[104] "Nasrallah Wins the War." *The Economist*, August 17, 2006.

Hezbollah's militia rivals the effectiveness of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). However, there has been vocal criticism of Hezbollah in and outside Lebanon for its support for Asad, which has diluted Hezbollah's image as a steadfast opponent of Israel and has embroiled it in war against other Muslims. 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 the 13 it held previously.

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.[105] 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 more self-sufficient[106] and able to assist IRGC-QF operations elsewhere, such as in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.[107]
- *Financial Support*. The State Department report for 2015 contained a specific figure, stating that Iran has provided Hezbollah with "hundreds of millions of dollars."[108] 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.[109] The higher figure could represent a U.S. reassessment of its previous estimates, or perhaps reflect a large increase due to Hezbollah's extensive combat on various battlefronts in Syria. The State Department's September 2018 "Outlaw Regime" report repeated the $700 million figure. On the other hand, U.S. officials assert that U.S. sanctions on Iran is contributing to financial difficulties acknowledged publicly by Hezbollah leaders, including in appeals for private donations. But, there has been no evident change in Hezbollah's operational behavior as a consequence of these financial challenges.
- *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,[110] presumably supplied mostly by Iran. Some are said to be capable of reaching Tel Aviv and other population centers in central Israel from south Lebanon. The State Department report adds that Israeli experts assert that Iran also has transferred to Hezbollah anti-ship and anti-aircraft capabilities.[111] These rockets and missiles are discussed

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

[106] Ibid.

[107] Ben Hubbard. *New York Times*, op cit.

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

[109] 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.

[110] State Department terrorism report for 2016, op cit.

[111] Ibid.

in the table above. 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.[112] 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 than its predecessors had. The United States has not acted against Hezbollah militarily, but it has supported Israeli air strikes in Syria that are intended to disrupt Iranian weapons supplies to Hezbollah. Successive Administrations have also, at times, provided U.S. military gear and other assistance to the Lebanese army to build it up as a counterweight to Hezbollah. It is not clear that such efforts have accomplished the stated objectives.

The Trump Administration has also increased sanctions against Hezbollah, using authorities that are often applied to Iran. During July-September 2019, the Administration imposed sanctions on a few 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 transaction business with Hezbollah, its affiliates, and partners.

Yemen/Bab el Mandeb Strait[113]

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 there as an opportunity to acquire significant leverage against Saudi Arabia. A 2011 "Arab Spring"-related uprising in Yemen forced longtime President Ali Abdullah Saleh to resign in January 2012. In March 2015, Saudi Arabia assembled an Arab coalition that, with some logistical help from U.S. forces, has helped the ousted government recapture some territory but has caused drastic humanitarian consequences without yet producing a political solution.[114]

Saudi Arabia, with U.S. and some U.N. backing, accuses Iran of providing the ballistic missiles that the Houthis have fired on Riyadh on several occasions. Reports by the United Nations have corroborated those assertions.[115] On November 29, 2018, the head of the State Department's "Iran Action Group," Brian Hook, displayed missiles, rockets, and other equipment that he asserted were supplied by Iran to the Houthis and captured by Saud-led coalition forces.[116] Among the systems Iran is providing are cruise missiles that are of increasing concern to U.S. commanders.

The increasingly sophisticated nature of Iran's support for the Houthis could suggest that Iran perceives the Houthis as a potential proxy to project power on the southwestern coast of the

[112] Avi Issacharoff, "Iran, facing off against Israel in Syria, now sending arms directly to Lebanon," *Times of Israel*, November 30, 2018.

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

[114] Ali al-Mujahed and Hugh Naylor. "Yemen Rebels Defy Saudi-led Attacks." *Washington Post*, March 28, 2015.

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

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

Arabian Peninsula. Iranian weapons shipments to the Houthis are banned by Resolution 2231 on Iran and also by Resolution 2216 on Yemen. 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. Iran subsequently deployed several warships to the Yemen seacoast as an apparent sign of support for the Houthis. 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:

> 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.[117]

Financial and Advisory Support

Many observers assess that Iran's support for the Houthis has been modest.

- The State Department's "Outlaw Regime" report states that since 2012, Iran "has spent hundreds of millions of dollars" aiding the Houthis. Secretary Pompeo mentioned the same figure in the transcript of his briefing for Senators on November 28, 2018.
- In that same transcript, Secretary Pompeo stated that a 20-person IRGC-QF unit called "Unit 190" is responsible for funneling Iranian weaponry to the Houthis. 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. 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." In the transcript of his remarks to Senators on November 28, 2018, Pompeo stated that "Iran wants to establish a version of Lebanese Hezbollah on the Arabian Peninsula so the mullahs in Tehran can control seaborne trade through strategic waterways like the Bab el-Mandeb Strait.... [W]e must also prevent Iran from entrenching itself in Yemen."[118] However, even though many Members of Congress express concerns with Iran's backing for the Houthis, several bills have passed the House and the Senate requiring 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.

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

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

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. Some reports indicate that, to evade the naval scrutiny, Iran has been transferring its weapons deliveries to a variety of small boats in the northern Persian Gulf, from where they sail to Yemen.[119] 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 Shahlai.[120] The operation came a few weeks after the U.S. State Department announced a $15 million reward for information leading to his capture.

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.

Turkey[121]

Iran and Turkey, which share a border, have extensive economic relations but sometimes tense political relations. Turkey is a member of NATO, and Iran has sought to limit Turkey's cooperation with any NATO plan to emplace military technology near Iran's borders. Turkey is mostly Sunni-inhabited whereas most Iranians are Shias. Turkey had advocated Asad's ouster as part of a solution for conflict-torn Syria whereas Iran is a key supporter of Asad. However, Asad's gains since 2015 have caused Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to publicly accept that Asad is likely to remain in power in Syria and to join Iran in Russia-led talks on a political solution for Syria. In August 2017, the first high-level Iranian military visit to Turkey since the Iranian revolution took place when the chief of staff of Iran's joint military headquarters visited Ankara. Iran and Turkey cooperate 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.

Turkey supported the JCPOA, and sanctions relief on Iran has 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 and has since been supplemented by an additional line. President Erdogan has indicated that Turkey will not cooperate with the reimposition of sanctions on Iran related to the U.S. exit from the JCPOA.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, Iran and Turkey were at odds over the strategic engagement of Turkey's then leaders with Israel. The Iran-Turkey dissonance on the issue faded after Erdogan's Islamist-rooted Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in Turkey. Turkey has since been a significant supporter of Hamas, which also receives support from Iran (see above).

[119] https://www.reuters.com/article/us-gulf-kuwait-iran-exclusive-idUSKBN1AH4I4.

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

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

North Africa

Two countries in North Africa, Egypt and Morocco, have been mentioned as potential members of the planned "Middle East Strategic Alliance" (MESA) to counter Iran.

Egypt[122]

Iran-Egypt relations have been strained for most of the period since the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979. Egypt is a Sunni-dominated state that is aligned politically and strategically with other Sunni governments such as Saudi Arabia and Jordan. Iran, under the newly formed Islamic Republic, broke relations with Egypt shortly after the 1979 peace treaty Egypt signed with Israel. After his election as Egypt's president, Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohammad Morsi visited Iran in August 2012, but relations worsened again after the military's overthrow of the Morsi government. Egypt now views Hamas as an Islamist threat and has sought to block Iranian and other weapons supplies to that movement. On the other hand, Egypt and Iran have found some common ground on Syria insofar as Sisi has not sought Asad's ouster. And, in April 2019, Egypt said that it would not join the U.S.-backed MESA alliance that is intended largely to counter Iran.

Morocco[123]

In May 2018, Morocco announced that it would sever diplomatic ties with Iran because of alleged Iranian support (via its ally Lebanese Hezbollah) for the Polisario Front, which seeks independence for the Western Sahara.[124] Morocco's foreign minister claimed that Hezbollah had provided surface-to-air missiles to the Polisario. Both Iran and Hezbollah denied the accusations. Morocco previously cut ties with Iran in March 2009 due to alleged Iranian efforts to spread Shiism in largely Sunni Morocco; diplomatic relations were reestablished in January 2017. Morocco has close relations with Saudi Arabia, which supported Morocco's severing ties with Iran.

There has been little, if any, evidence that influencing politics or political outcomes in Morocco has been a significant feature of Iran's regional policies or its intent. Iranian leaders rarely, if ever, mention Morocco when they outline Iranian policy in the Middle East region. There are few easily identifiable factions in Morocco that are pro-Iranian or with which the IRGC-QF can work.

[122] For comprehensive analysis on Egypt, see CRS Report RL33003, *Egypt: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jeremy M. Sharp.

[123] For comprehensive analysis on Morocco, see CRS Report RS21579, *Morocco: Current Issues*, by Alexis Arieff.

[124] Al Jazeera, May 1, 2018. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/05/morocco-cuts-diplomatic-ties-iran-western-sahara-feud-180501173229190.html.

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 similar to those that Iran characterizes as a threat. Most of the Central Asia states that were part of the Soviet Union are governed by authoritarian leaders. Afghanistan remains politically weak, and other countries in the region, particularly India, seek greater integration with the United States and other world powers and tend to downplay cooperation with Iran.

Figure 4. South and Central Asia Region

Source: Created by CRS.

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 might stoke separatism among Iran's large Azeri Turkic population, which has sometimes been restive. Iran has generally tilted toward Armenia, which is Christian, in Armenia's conflict with Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave.

For more than two decades, Azerbaijan has engaged in strategic cooperation with the United States against Iran (and Russia), including Azerbaijan's deployments of troops to and facilitation of supply routes to Afghanistan,[125]and counterterrorism cooperation. In the 1990s, the United States successfully backed construction of the Baku-Tblisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, intended in part to provide non-Iranian and non-Russian export routes. The United States has accepted Azerbaijan's need to deal with Iran on some major regional energy projects: several U.S. sanctions laws exempt from sanctions long-standing joint natural gas projects that involve some Iranian firms.

The lifting of sanctions on Iran in 2016 contributed to Azerbaijan's modification of its policy toward Iran. In August 2016, Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev hosted Rouhani and Russia's President Vladimir Putin to a "Baku Summit," in which a major topic was a long-discussed "North-South Transport Corridor" involving rail, road, and shipping infrastructure from Russia to Iran, through Azerbaijan. In December 2016, President Rouhani visited Armenia to discuss a Persian Gulf-Black Sea transit and transport corridor.[126] However, any such projects are likely on hold due to the reimposition of U.S. sanctions in 2018.

[125] http://foreignpolicynews.org/2014/04/10/azerbaijans-strategic-relations-united-states/.

[126] http://www.tehrantimes.com/news/409363/Iran-Armenia-discuss-Persian-Gulf-Black-Sea-corridor.

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 the Central Asian states (except Tajikistan) share a common language and culture with Turkey. Several have active Sunni Islamist opposition movements, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU),[127]giving the Central Asian governments common cause with Iran to prevent Sunni jihadist terrorist actions.

Iran has been given 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 on the grounds that it is under U.N. Security Council sanctions.[128] Some officials from SCO member countries asserted that the JCPOA removed that formal obstacle to Iran's obtaining full membership, but opposition among some SCO countries has denied Iran from full membership to date.

Iran and the Central Asian states are expanding economic relations, perhaps in part to fit into China's "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI) to build up infrastructure in countries west of China—akin to reviving the old "Silk Road. In December 2014, a new railway was inaugurated through Iran, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan, providing a link from the Persian Gulf to Central Asia.[129] Iran was hoping that the 2016 lifting of sanctions would position Iran as central to energy and transportation routes linking East Asia with Europe—a vision that was discussed with Iranian leaders during the January 2016 visit to Iran of China's President Xi Jinping. However, the reimposition of U.S. sanctions in 2018 is likely to slow or halt that ambition.

Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan and Iran have a land border in Iran's northeast. Supreme Leader Khamene'i is of Turkic origin; his family has close ties to the Iranian city of Mashhad, capital of Khorasan Province, which borders Turkmenistan. The two countries are also both rich in natural gas reserves. A natural gas pipeline from Iran to Turkey, fed with Turkmenistan's gas, began operations in 1997, and a second pipeline was completed in 2010. China has since become Turkmenistan's largest natural gas customer.

Another potential project favored by Turkmenistan and the United States would likely reduce interest in pipelines that transit Iran. President Berdymukhamedov has revived his predecessor's 1996 proposal to build a gas pipeline through Afghanistan to Pakistan and India (termed the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India, or "TAPI" pipeline). In August 2015, Turkmenistan's state-owned gas company was named head of the pipeline consortium and Turkmenistan officials said the project was formally inaugurated in December 2015.[130]

---

[127] Sebastien Peyrouse. "Iran's Growing Role in Central Asia? Geopolitical, Economic, and Political Profit and Loss Account. Al Jazeera Center for Studies. April 6, 2014. http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/dossiers/2014/04/2014416940377354.html. The IMU, which is active in Afghanistan, in mid-2015 declared its loyalty to the Islamic State organization.

[128] 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.

[129] http://www.railwaygazette.com/news/news/asia/single-view/view/iran-turkmenistan-kazakhstan-rail-link-inaugurated.html.

[130] http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/09/15/turkmenistan-pipeline-idUSL5N11L0RE20150915.

Tajikistan

Iran and Tajikistan share a common Persian language, as well as literary and cultural ties, but the two do not share a border, and most Tajikistan citizens are Sunni Muslims. President Imamali Rakhmonov has asserted that Iran and Tajikistan face common threats from arms races, international terrorism, political extremism, fundamentalism, separatism, drug trafficking, transnational organized crime, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. The two countries have agreed to mutual noninterference in each other's internal affairs and the peaceful settlement of disputes, such as over border, water, and energy issues.[131]

Some Sunni Islamist extremist groups that pose a threat to Tajikistan are allied with Al Qaeda or the Islamic State. Tajikistan's leaders appear particularly concerned about Islamist movements in part because the Islamist-led United Tajik Opposition posed a serious threat to the newly independent government in the early 1990s, and a settlement of the insurgency in the late 1990s did not fully resolve government-Islamist opposition tensions. The Tajikistan government has detained members of Jundallah (Warriors of Allah)—a Pakistan-based Islamic extremist group that has conducted bombings and attacks against Iranian security personnel and mosques in Sunni areas of eastern Iran. In November 2010, the State Department named the group an FTO.

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, in September 2014, Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev met with President Rouhani and expressed the hope that a JCPOA would be achieved in order to better integrate Iran economically into the Central Asian region.[132] Kazakhstan played a role in the commercial arrangements that produced the December 2015 shipment out to Russia of almost all of Iran's stockpile of low-enriched uranium, fulfilling a key JCPOA requirement. 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, which Norway paid for.

When U.S. sanctions were eased, Iran was open to additional opportunities to cooperate with Kazakhstan on energy and infrastructure projects. Kazakhstan possesses 30 billion barrels of proven oil reserves (about 2% of world reserves) and 45.7 trillion cubic feet of proven gas reserves (less than 1% of world reserves). Iran and Kazakhstan do not have any joint energy ventures in the Caspian or elsewhere, but after the finalization of the JCPOA in July 2015, the two countries resumed Caspian oil swap arrangements that were discontinued in 2011.[133] The two countries are not at odds over specific sections of the Caspian Sea, and some aspects, but not all, of the territorial questions regarding the Caspian were settled in 2018.

Uzbekistan

During the 1990s, Uzbekistan, which has the largest military of the Central Asian states, identified Iran as a potential regional rival and as a supporter of Islamist movements in the region. However, since 1999, Uzbekistan and Iran—which do not share a common border or significant language or cultural links—have moved somewhat closer over shared stated concerns about Sunni Islamist extremist movements, particularly the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)

[131] Center for Effective Dispute Resolution (CEDR), March 16, 2013, Doc. No. CEL-54015758.

[132] http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13930618000811.

[133] http://en.mehrnews.com/news/109439/Kazakhstan-to-resume-oil-swap-with-Iran.

extremist group, which is affiliated with Al Qaeda. In February 1999, the IMU was allegedly responsible for six bomb blasts in Tashkent's governmental area targeted the country's leadership. In September 2000, the State Department designated the IMU as an FTO.[134] The IMU itself has not claimed responsibility for any terrorist attacks in Iran and appears focused primarily on activities against the governments of Afghanistan and Uzbekistan.

Iran-Uzbekistan relations have not changed significantly since the August 2016 death of Uzbekistan's longtime President Islam Karimov and his replacement by Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who was at the time the Prime Minister. Uzbekistan has substantial natural gas resources but it and Iran do not have joint energy-related ventures.

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 is pursuing a multitrack strategy by helping develop Afghanistan economically, engaging the central government, supporting pro-Iranian groups and, at times, arming Taliban fighters. 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 is trying to thwart the Islamic state organization on numerous fronts throughout the region. Iran and Afghanistan have cooperated in their shared struggle against narcotics trafficking. Afghan President Ghani and Iranian leaders meet regularly.[135]

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. In October 2010, then-President Hamid Karzai admitted that Iran was providing cash payments (about $2 million per year) to his government.[136] There are persistent allegations that Iran funds Afghan provincial and parliamentary candidates in areas dominated by Persian-speaking and Shia minorities.[137]

Even though it engages the Afghan government, Tehran has in the recent past sought leverage against U.S. forces in Afghanistan and in any Taliban-Afghan government peace settlement. Past State Department reports on international terrorism have accused Iran of providing materiel support to select Taliban and other militants in Afghanistan, and of training Taliban fighters.[138] In July 2012, Iran allowed the Taliban to open an office in Zahedan (eastern Iran).[139] Reflecting

[134] http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2001/html/10252.htm#imu.

[135] "Afghanistan, Iran to Work together Against "Macabre" IS Threat." RFE/RL, April 22, 2015; Iran to make all-out effort to strengthen Afghanistan's stability. Mehr News, June 15, 2019.

[136] Dexter Filkins. "Iran Is Said to Give Top Karzai Aide Cash by the Bagful." *New York Times*, October 23, 2010.

[137] "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] State Department, Country Reports on International Terrorism: 2011. http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2011/195547.htm.

[139] Maria Abi-Habib, "Tehran Builds On Outreach to Taliban," *Wall Street Journal*, August 1, 2012.

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 but prohibits the United States from launching military action against other countries from Afghanistan. In his May 21, 2018, speech, 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." In November 2018, Trump Administration officials displayed a number of Iranian-origin rockets that allegedly were provided to the Taliban. Secretary Pompeo also accused Iran of being behind a 2019 bombing in Kabul for which the Taliban had previously claimed responsibility.

Purported 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.

Pakistan[140]

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.[141] 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.[142] Two Iranian Sunni Muslim militant opposition groups—*Jundullah* (named by the United States as an FTO, as discussed above) and *Jaysh al-Adl*—operate from western Pakistan.

A significant factor dividing them is Pakistan's relationship with Saudi Arabia. Pakistan joined Saudi Arabia's 34-nation "antiterrorism coalition" in December 2015, which was announced as a response to the Islamic State. Iran asserts it is directed at reducing Iran's regional influence. Still, some reports in October 2019 indicated that Saudi Arabia views Pakistan as potentially able to build a diplomatic bridge for Saudi Arabia to reach out to Iran to lower Gulf tensions.

The Iran-Pakistan bilateral agenda has included a joint major gas pipeline project that would ease Pakistan's energy shortages while providing Iran an additional customer for its large natural gas reserves. As originally conceived, the line would continue on to India, but India withdrew from the project at its early stages. Then-President of Iran Ahmadinejad and Pakistan's then-President Asif Ali Zardari formally inaugurated the project in March 2013. Iran has completed the line on its side of the border, but Pakistan was unable to finance the project on its side of the border until China agreed in April 2015 to build the pipeline at a cost of about $2 billion.[143] U.S. officials

[140] 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.

[141] John Lancaster and Kamran Khan, "Pakistanis Say Nuclear Scientists Aided Iran," *Washington Post*, January 24, 2004.

[142] Author conversations with experts in Washington, DC, who consult with Iranian government officials. 2013-15.

[143] http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/china-to-build-pakistan-iran-gas-pipeline-pakistan-government/articleshow/46867932.cms.

stated that the project could be subject to U.S. sanctions under the Iran Sanctions Act,[144] which went into effect again on November 5, 2018, and there is little evident movement on the project.

India[145]

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 generally 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. India has long sought to develop Iran's Chabahar port, which would give India direct access to Afghanistan and Central Asia without relying on transit routes through Pakistan. India, Iran, and Afghanistan held a ceremony in May 2016 to herald the start of work. In December 2017, Iran inaugurated the $1 billion expansion of Chabahar—a project that U.S. officials have excepted from U.S. sanctions on Iran because of its contribution to Afghanistan's development.[146] During Rouhani's visit to India in February 2018, he and India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi signed memoranda outlining future expanded energy cooperation.

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. The military relationship between the countries has withered in recent years.

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, which have conducted attacks in Russia. Russia opposed the U.S. exit from the JCPOA and has said it would not cooperate with reimposed U.S. secondary sanctions on Iran, and Russian officials have largely blamed Washington for the U.S.-Iran tensions since May 2019. The two countries have exchanged several presidential visits since 2017, with Russian President Putin's visit to Tehran on November 1, 2017, resulting in an agreement to collaborate on energy deals valued at about $30 billion.[147]

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 continuation in office more strongly that do the leaders of Russia. In August 2016, Iran allowed Russia to stage bombing runs in Syria from a base in western Iran, near the city of Hamadan. The Russian use of the base ran counter to Iran's constitution, which

[144] http://www.thenational.ae/business/energy/big-powers-block-iran-pakistan-gas-pipeline-plans.

[145] 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.

[146] U.S. Envoy Haley Tells Modi Important to Cut Imports of Iranian Oil. Reuters, June 27, 2018.

[147] "Russia and Iran Sign $30 bn Energy Agreements." *Financial Times*, November 1, 2017.

bans foreign use of Iran's military facilities, and Iran subsequently ended the arrangement after Russia publicized it.

Russia has been Iran's main supplier of conventional weaponry and a significant supplier of missile-related technology. In February 2016, Iran's then-Defense Minister Hosein Dehgan visited Moscow reportedly to discuss purchasing Su-30 combat aircraft, T-90 tanks, helicopters, and other defense equipment. Under Resolution 2231, selling such gear would require Security Council approval—until the provision sunsets in October 2020—and U.S. officials have said publicly they would not support such a sale. 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 announced, Russia delivered the system. In January 2015, Iran and Russia signed a memorandum of understanding on defense cooperation.[148]

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. Since December 2015, Russia's Rosatom has shipped out of Iran of almost all of Iran's stockpile of low-enriched uranium—helping Iran meet a key requirement of the JCPOA. The U.S. ending of sanctions waivers that allowed for the shipments have complicated this technical assistance.

Europe

Iran's foreign policy is focused on urging the European countries to continue providing Iran with the economic benefits of the JCPOA in the wake of the May 2018 Trump Administration pullout from that accord. The EU is struggling with that effort, insofar as many European companies have ceased transactions with Iran in order not to jeopardize business in the United States. At the same time, while criticizing Iran's provocative actions such as the September 14, 2019, attack on Saudi energy infrastructure, the European leaders are urging the Trump Administration to seek a political solution to U.S.-Iran tensions, and several European leaders are seeking to mediate that solution. The EU countries are also urging Iran to come back into full compliance with the JCPOA amid reports the EU participants, in January 2020, have invoked the dispute resolution mechanism of the JCPOA.

In recent years, the European countries have criticized Iran for alleged Iranian plots to assassinate dissidents in Europe (discussed above). 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 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 a Dutch letter linking Iran to assassinations of Dutch nationals of Iranian origin in 2015 and 2017, the EU sanctioned the internal security unit of Iran's Intelligence ministry and two Iranian operatives for sponsoring acts of terrorism.[149]

[148] Ibid.

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

It is the terrorism issue that has, in the past, 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. But, 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 and one country, North Korea, that is widely accused of supplying Iran with missile and other military-related technology.

China[150]

Strategically, China asserts that it faces a potential threat from Sunni Muslim extremists in western China and it appears to see Shia Iran as a potential ally against Sunni radicals. China also appears to agree with Iran's view that the Asad regime is preferable to the Islamic State and other Islamist rebel organizations. 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. During U.N. Security Council deliberations on Iran during 2006-2013, China argued for less stringent sanctions than did the United States, 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 and the government has continued to buy Iranian oil, despite the May 2019 ending of U.S. exceptions from sanctions for the purchase of Iranian oil, although in much smaller volumes than before the exceptions were terminated. The United States has sanctioned some Chinese firms for this continued trade.

China in the past 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. A number of China-based entities have been sanctioned by the United States, including in 2017, for allegedly aiding Iran's missile, nuclear, and conventional weapons programs.

Shortly after Implementation Day of the JCPOA in January 2016, China's President Xi Jinping included Tehran on a visit to the Middle East region, which was focused on China's vision of an energy and transportation corridor extending throughout Eurasia (Belt and Road Initiative, BRI). The two countries agreed to expand trade to $600 billion over the next decade. Iran's burgeoning economic and diplomatic relationships with the Central Asian states appear intended, at least in part, to enable Iran to take advantage of the substantial Chinese investment in the region that is required to implement its BRI vision. In February 2016, the first rail cargo from China arrived in Iran via the Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran link.

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 have largely left the Iran market now that U.S. secondary sanctions have been reimposed. 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

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

shipping in the Gulf. Neither Japan nor South Korea has been extensively involved in security and strategic issues in the Middle East, but, in the interests of securing its oil supplies from 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 Japan and South Korea are close allies of the United States. Both countries are wary of Iran's reported military and technology relations with North Korea.

Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe reportedly had planned to visit Iran in 2016, but the visit did not take place until late June 2019, amidst heightened U.S.-Iran tensions. The visit, the first by a leader of Japan to the Islamic Republic, reportedly sought to de-escalate the tensions through indirect mediation, but no progress was reported. It was followed up by a visit to Japan by Iranian President Rouhani in late December 2019.

During the period when the United States was implementing the JCPOA, South Korea's then-President Geun-hye Park visited Tehran in May 2016 for the first tour of Iran by a South Korean president to Iran since 1962, accompanied by representatives of 236 South Korean companies and organizations. 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.

North Korea

Iran and North Korea have been aligned as "rogue states" 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.[151] 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 from published sources.

North Korea has not at any time 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. However, the expansion of such retransfers are likely limited by the adoption in September 2017 of additional U.N. sanctions limiting the supply of oil to North Korea.

Latin America[152]

Iran has cultivated relations with leaders in Latin America that share Iran's distrust of the United States, and it has sought to position IRGC-QF operatives and Hezbollah members in Latin America to potentially carry out terrorist attacks there.[153] 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.[154] 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 gain support for his criticisms of U.S. policies. President

[151] http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303763804579183231117914364.

[152] For more information on the issues discussed in this section, see CRS Report RS21049, *Latin America: Terrorism Issues*, by Mark P. Sullivan and June S. Beittel.

[153] Ilan Berman. "Iran Courts Latin America." Middle East Quarterly, Summer 2012. http://www.meforum.org/3297/iran-latin-america.

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

Rouhani has expressed only modest interest in expanding ties in Latin America, making his only visit to the region in September 2016 in the course of traveling to the annual U.N. General Assembly meetings in New York. He held meetings in Cuba, Chile, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Venezuela—the countries that Ahmadinejad visited during his presidency.

The countries in which Iran appears to have sought to exert influence or retain the option, likely in partnership with Lebanese Hezbollah, for terrorist attacks include 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. In the 112th Congress, the Countering Iran in the Western Hemisphere Act (H.R. 3783, P.L. 112-220) required the Administration to develop a strategy to counter Iran's influence in Latin America, which was provided to Congress in June 2013.[155]

Figure 5. Latin America

Source: Created by CRS.

Venezuela[156]

Iran developed close relations with Venezuela during the rule of outspoken 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 in the face of the serious political challenge from the domestic opposition. Iranian leaders have publicly supported Maduro as the legitimate leader of Venezuela and, in April 2019, Iran resumed a long-dormant direct air route from Tehran to Venezuela.[157] 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 military.[158] The extent of any Iranian or Hezbollah involvement in current events in Venezuela remains unclear, but 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."[159] Earlier, after meeting with Venezuelan opposition leader Juan Guaido in Colombia, Secretary Pompeo said Hezbollah "has found a home in Venezuela under Maduro. This is unacceptable."

Even 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."[160] Very

[155] State Department, "Annex A: Unclassified Summary of Policy Recommendations," June 2013.

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

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

[158] Iran Calls Pompeo's Accusations of Meddling in Venezuela 'Ridiculous.' Telesur, April 15, 2019.

[159] Pompeo: Iranian Proxy Mobilizing in America's Backyard. The American Conservative, January 28, 2020.

[160] Comments by President Barack Obama on "CNN: The Situation Room," July 11, 2012.

few of the economic agreements announced were implemented. A direct air link was reportedly restarted by President Maduro in January 2015 in order to try to promote tourism between the two countries.[161] Petroleos de Venezuela (PDVSA)—which operates the Citgo gasoline stations in the United States—has been supplying Iran with gasoline since 2009, in contravention of U.S. sanctions, and PDVSA was sanctioned under the Iran Sanctions Act in May 2011.[162] The United States "de-listed" PDVSA as stipulated in the JCPOA, but it was "re-listed" in concert with the reimposition of U.S. sanctions on Iran in 2018.

Argentina[163]

In Argentina, Iran and Hezbollah carried out acts of terrorism against Israeli and Jewish targets in Buenos Aires that continue to affect Iran-Argentina relations. The major attacks were the 1992 bombing of the Israeli embassy and the 1994 bombing of a Jewish community center (Argentine-Israeli Mutual Association, AMIA). Argentinian officials and prosecutors have asserted that these attacks were carried out by Hezbollah operatives, assisted by Iranian diplomats and their diplomatic privileges, although no one has been convicted.[164]

The Buenos Aires attacks took place more than 20 years ago and there have not been any recent public indications that Iran and/or Hezbollah are planning attacks in Argentina or elsewhere in Latin America. However, in February 2015, Uruguay stated that an Iranian diplomat posted there had left the country before Uruguay issued a formal complaint that the diplomat had tested the security measures of Israel's embassy in the capital, Montevideo.[165] 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.

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. In January 2015, Nisman was found dead of a gunshot wound, amid reports that he was to request indictment of Argentina's president for conspiring with Iran to downplay the AMIA bombing.

[161] http://panampost.com/sabrina-martin/2015/04/06/iran-takes-venezuelan-money-passes-on-deliveries/.

[162] http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/05/24/us-iran-usa-sanctions-idUSTRE74N47R20110524.

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

[164] Daniel Politi. "Argentina Says Those in Hezbollah Are Terrorists." New York Times, July 19, 2019.

[165] "Questions Swirl over Incident Involving Iranian Diplomat in Uruguay." *LatinNews* Daily, February 9, 2015.

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.

Figure 6. Sudan

Source: Created by CRS.

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. Amid a Saudi-Iran dispute in January 2016 over the Nimr execution, several African countries broke relations with Iran outright, including Djibouti, Comoros, Somalia, and Sudan. The UAE, in particular, has actively sought allies in the Horn of Africa to contain Iranian influence. 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 the continent a priority, but Tehran has retained an interest in cultivating 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.[166] 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.[167]

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. In May 2013, a court in Kenya found two Iranian men guilty of planning to carry out bombings in Kenya, apparently against Israeli targets. In December 2016, two Iranians and a Kenyan who worked for Iran's embassy in Nairobi were charged with collecting information for a terrorist act after filming the Israeli embassy in that city. Senegal cut diplomatic ties with Iran between 2011 and 2013 after claiming that Iran had trafficked weapons to its domestic separatist insurgency.

[166] 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. https://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/12/world/africa/a-trail-of-bullet-casings-leads-from-africas-wars-to-iran.html?mtrref=www.google.com&gwh=404CEDBD8247A8A74FBA1C19E2589305&gwt=pay.

[167] 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/.

Sudan[168]

Iran's relations with the government of Sudan, which were extensive since the early 1990s, have frayed since 2014 as Sudan has moved closer to Iran's GCC rivals. Sudan, like Iran, is still named by the United States as a state sponsor of terrorism, although U.S. officials have praised Sudan's counterterrorism cooperation in recent years.[169] The Iran-Sudan relationship expanded significantly 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, including the Popular Defense Force militia,[170]Iranian pilots reportedly assisted Sudan's air force, and Iran's naval forces visited Port Sudan. Iran also reportedly played a key role in helping Sudan build a military industry.[171] During this period, Israel repeatedly accused Iran of transshipping weapons to Hamas via Sudan,[172] and Israel at times, took military action against sites in Sudan that Israel asserted were controlled by Iran.[173]

However, Sudan has always been considered 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.[174] In March 2015, Sudan joined the Saudi-led Arab coalition against the Houthis in Yemen by contributing ground troops. In December 2015, Sudan joined the Saudi-led antiterrorism coalition discussed earlier. 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 is willing to rebuild relations with Iran, and Saudi Arabia and the UAE have given the new regime billions of dollars in aid.

Outlook

Key questions include whether, and if so, how, U.S. actions might alter Iran's behavior, and whether the U.S. and Iranian national security policies place the two countries on a path to sustained armed conflict. To date, no U.S. strategy, by any Administration, has reduced Iran's inclination to intervene in the region. Trump Administration officials asserted that the sanctions relief of the JCPOA enabled Iran to increase its regional malign activities, and that its policy of reimposing sanctions have severely reduced Iran's available resources to conduct regional

[168] For comprehensive analysis on Sudan, including the post-Bashir period, see CRS Report R43957, *Sudan*, by Lauren Ploch Blanchard, and CRS Report R45794, *Sudan's Uncertain Transition*, by Lauren Ploch Blanchard.

[169] State Department, Country Reports n Terrorism: 2016; Jina Moore. "U.S. is Open to Removing Sudan from Terrorism List, Diplomat Says." *New York Times*, November 16, 2017.

[170] "Did Israel Just Bow Up an Iranian Weapons Factory in Sudan?" *Christian Science Monitor*, October 25, 2012.

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

[172] "Were the Israelis Behind the 'Mystery' Air Strike in Sudan?" *Time*, April 6, 2011; "Car Blast in E. Sudan, Khartoum Points to Israel," *Reuters*, May 22, 2012; "Rockets and Meetings," Africa Confidential, May 25, 2012.Weapons Documented in South Kordofan," *Small Arms Survey*, April 2012.

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

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

activities.[175] However, it can be argued that the level of Iran's regional influence is linked more to opportunities provided by the region's conflicts than to the level of Iran's financial resources. Whereas deployments of additional U.S. military force to the region might deter some Iranian actions, U.S. buildups arguably have not caused Iran to alter its fundamental regional strategies.

As noted throughout, Administration efforts against Iran included imposition of sanctions on various Iranian activities; provision of advice, training, and counterterrorism assistance to regional leaders and groups who seek to limit Iranian influence; and deployment of U.S. forces to intercept Iranian weapons shipments and deter Iranian ground action. Additional U.S. pressure on Iran—particularly if such pressure involves military action—could embroil the United States more deeply in regional 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 missiles.
- Iran is likely to undertake additional actions in an effort to pressure the United States and its partners to ease sanctions.
- Iran might, through its allies and proxies in Syria and Iraq, succeed in establishing a secure land corridor extending from Iran to Lebanon and in pressuring Israel from the Syrian border as well as the Lebanese border.
- The lifting of the U.N. ban on arms sales to Iran in October 2020 will enable Iran to modernize its armed forces, possibly to the point where it can move ground forces across waterways such as the Strait of Hormuz.
- Iran could further increase its assistance to opposition factions in Bahrain, which has apparently been limited to date to only small, militant underground groups.[176]
- Iran might succeed in emerging as a major regional energy and trading hub, both within and outside its participation in China's BRI initiative, potentially expanding Iran's political influence to an even greater extent.
- Various regional powers might establish or expand military cooperation with Iran, a development that could strengthen Iran's conventional capabilities.

On the other hand, in order to preserve at least some multilateral sanctions relief and avoid the potential for confrontation—or perhaps as part of a new JCPOA—Iran might be induced to accept regional settlements. Those who take this view argue the following:

- Iran might be willing to negotiate a revised JCPOA that, among other provisions, limits Iran's development of missiles.
- Iran might be persuaded to curtail its delivery of additional long-range rockets or other military equipment 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 gain admission to the SCO and cooperate more systematically with its members against the Islamic State or other terrorist organizations.

[175] Remarks by Special Advisor to the Secretary of State on Iran Brian Hook. Atlantic Council, July 17, 2019.

[176] Ibid.

- 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.

Domestic Iranian factors could cause Iran's foreign policy to shift. For example

- Protests that have taken place since late 2017 could escalate and 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.

Author Information

Kenneth Katzman
Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.