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# Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies

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March 20, 2018

**Congressional Research Service**

7-5700

[www.crs.gov](http://www.crs.gov)

R44017

## Summary

Iran's national security policy is the product of many, and sometimes competing, factors: the ideology of Iran's Islamic revolution; Iranian leaders' perception of threats to the regime and to the country; long-standing Iranian national interests; and the interaction of the Iranian regime's various factions and constituencies. The main themes in Iranian policy are the following:

- Iran seeks to deter or thwart U.S. or other efforts to invade or intimidate it, or to change its regime.
- Iran has sought to take advantage of opportunities of regional conflicts to overturn a power structure in the Middle East that Iran asserts favors the United States, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and other Sunni Muslim Arab regimes.
- Iran seeks to enhance its international prestige and restore a sense of “greatness” reminiscent of ancient Persian empires.
- Iran characterizes its support for Shiite and other Islamist movements as support for the “oppressed” and asserts that Saudi Arabia, in particular, is instigating sectarian tensions and trying to exclude Iran from regional affairs.
- Iran is attempting to use the sanctions relief provided by the July 2015 multilateral nuclear agreement (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA) to to emerge as a regional energy and trade hub and to negotiate future weapons buys. The sanctions easing has provided Iran with additional financial resources, although it is not clear whether Iran has deployed significant additional resources on its regional interventions. Protests in Iran during January 2018 indicated that many Iranians oppose using substantial Iranian resources abroad.
- 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, but support the reintegration into regional and international diplomacy that is advocated by Iran's elected president, Hassan Rouhani.

Of significant concern to successive U.S. administrations is Iran's provision of material support to its allied governments such as Syria, and to regional armed factions such as Lebanese Hezbollah, Houthi rebels in Yemen, Iraqi Shiite militias, and Bahrain militant groups. Several of Iran's allies and proxies have conducted acts of international terrorism and, for several decades, an annual State Department report on international terrorism has described Iran as the leading state sponsor of terrorism. Israeli leaders identify Iran's significant presence in Syria as a growing—and unacceptable—threat to Israel's security. The Trump Administration has cited Iran's regional “malign activities” and repeated ballistic missile tests to assert that “Iran's provocative actions threaten the United States, [and] the [Middle East] region,” and that the JCPOA has failed to address Iran's objectionable behavior beyond its nuclear program. The Trump Administration and the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress have imposed additional sanctions on Iran's missile program and conventional arms purchases. The Administration has supported efforts by regional allies to counter Iran and deployed troops to some regional conflicts partly for the purpose of containing Iran. On October 13, 2017, President Trump asked Congress and U.S. allies to address the JCPOA's weaknesses, including its lack of curbs on Iran's missile program or on Iran's support for regional armed factions—and threatened to end U.S. participation in the JCPOA unless such steps are taken. However, the President did not outline specific new steps to blunt Iran's regional influence beyond modest new sanctions on the IRGC. Sanctions alone have been ineffective, to date, in reducing Iran's regional influence.

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## Introduction

Successive Administrations have identified Iran as a key national security challenge, citing Iran's nuclear and missile programs as well as its long-standing attempts to counter many U.S. objectives in the region. Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats, in his February 13, 2018, annual worldwide threat assessment testimony before Congress, assessed that "Iran will seek to expand its influence in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, where it sees conflicts generally trending in Tehran's favor..." and "Iran will develop military capabilities that threaten U.S. forces and allies in the region..." Successive National Defense Authorization Acts (NDAAAs) require an annual report on Iran's military power, which has in recent years contained assessments of Iran similar to those presented by the intelligence community.<sup>1</sup>

## Iran's Policy Motivators

Iran's foreign and defense policies are products of overlapping, and sometimes contradictory, motivations. One expert has characterized these contradictions as indecision over whether Iran is a "nation or a cause."<sup>2</sup>

## Threat Perception

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

- Iran's paramount decision-maker, Supreme Leader Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i, has repeatedly stated that the United States has never accepted the Islamic revolution and seeks to overturn it through support for domestic opposition to the regime, imposition of economic sanctions, and support for Iran's regional adversaries.<sup>3</sup> He frequently warns against Western "cultural influence"—social behavior that he asserts does not comport with Iran's societal and Islamic values. U.S. officials and reports have said that "Supreme Leader Ali Khamene'i maintains a deep distrust of U.S. intentions toward Iran...."<sup>4</sup>
- Iran's leaders assert that the U.S. maintenance of a large military presence in the Persian Gulf region and in other countries around Iran reflects intent to intimidate Iran or attack it if Iran pursues policies the United States finds inimical.<sup>5</sup>
- Iran's leaders assert that the United States' support for Sunni Arab regimes that oppose Iran has led to the empowerment of radical Sunni Islamist groups and spawned Sunni-dominated terrorist groups such as the Islamic State.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Fiscal Year 2016 Report on the Military Power of Iran." Defense Department, Unclassified Executive Summary, January 2017. The FY2016 and FY2017 NDAAAs (P.L. 114-92 and P.L. 114-328) extended the annual DOD reporting requirement until the end of 2025 and required that the report include information on Iran's offensive and defensive cyber capabilities, and its cooperation with other state or non-state actors to conduct or mask its cyber operations.

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

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

<sup>4</sup> [https://fas.org/man/eprint/dod\\_iran\\_2016.pdf](https://fas.org/man/eprint/dod_iran_2016.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> 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>.

## Ideology

The ideology of Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution continues to infuse Iran's foreign policy. The revolution overthrew a secular, authoritarian leader, the Shah, who the leaders of the revolution asserted had suppressed Islam and its clergy. A clerical regime was established in which ultimate power is invested in a "Supreme Leader" who melds political and religious authority.

- In the early years after the revolution, Iran attempted to "export" its revolution to nearby Muslim states. In the late 1990s, Iran appeared to abandon that goal because its promotion produced resistance to Iran in the region.<sup>7</sup> However, the various conflicts in the region that arose from the 2011 "Arab Spring" uprisings have appeared to give Iran opportunities to revive that goal to some extent.
- Iran's leaders assert that the political and economic structures of the Middle East are heavily weighted against "oppressed" peoples and in favor of the United States and its regional allies. Iranian leaders generally describe as "oppressed" peoples the Palestinians, who do not have a state of their own, and Shiite Muslims, who are underrepresented 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 and economic domination that must be brought to an end. Iranian officials claim that the creation of Israel is a manifestation of Western intervention that deprived the Palestinians of legitimate rights.
- Iran claims its ideology is non-sectarian and not based on religious ideology. It cites its support for Sunni groups such as Hamas and for secular Palestinian groups as evidence that it works with non-Islamist, non-Shiite groups to promote the rights of the Palestinians.

## National Interests

Iran's national interests usually dovetail with, but sometimes conflict with, Iran's ideology.

- Iran's leaders, stressing Iran's well-developed civilization and historic independence, claim 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 sometimes tempered its commitment to aid other Shiites to promote its geopolitical interests. For example, it has supported mostly Christian-inhabited Armenia, rather than Shiite-inhabited Azerbaijan, in part to thwart cross-border Azeri nationalism among Iran's large Azeri minority. It has refrained from backing Islamist movements in the Central Asian countries, which are mainly

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(...continued)

<sup>6</sup> Ramin Mostaghim. "Iranians Rally to Support Iraq; Some Blame U.S. for Sunni Insurgency." *Los Angeles Times*, June 24, 2014. <http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-iran-volunteers-militants-iraq-20140624-story.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Soner Cagaptay, James F. Jeffrey, and Mehdi Khalaji. "Iran Won't Give Up on Its Revolution." *New York Times*, op-ed, April 26, 2015.

Sunni and potentially hostile toward Iran. Russia takes a similar view of Central Asian and other Sunni-dominated Islamist groups as does Iran.

- Even though Iranian leaders accuse U.S. allies of contributing to U.S. efforts to structure the Middle East to the advantage of the United States and Israel, Iranian officials have sought to engage with and benefit from transactions with historic U.S. allies, such as Turkey, to try to thwart international sanctions.

## Factional Interests, Competition, and Public Opinion

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

- According to Iran's constitution and in practice, Iran's Supreme Leader has final say over all major foreign policy decisions. Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i, Supreme Leader since 1989, consistently expresses mistrust of U.S. intentions toward Iran. His consistent refrain, and the title of his book widely available in Iran, is "I am a revolutionary, not a diplomat."<sup>8</sup> Leaders of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the military and internal security force created after the Islamic revolution, consistently express support for Khamene'i and an assertive foreign policy.
- 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 easing of international sanctions under the JCPOA, increased worldwide attention to Iran's views, and positions Iran as a potential trade and transportation hub in the region. Rouhani has said that the JCPOA is "a beginning for creating an atmosphere of friendship and co-operation with various countries."<sup>9</sup> Rouhani tends to draw support from Iran's youth and intellectuals, who say they want greater integration with the international community and who helped Rouhani achieve a convincing first-round reelection victory on May 19, 2017, with 57% of the vote against a candidate with unified hardliner backing.
- Public opinion might be a growing factor in Iranian foreign policy. Significant protests occurred in Iran over economic and other issues in December 2017-January 2018. Many protesters expressed opposition to the use of Iran's financial resources for regional interventions rather than to improve the living standards of the population.

## Instruments of Iran's National Security Strategy

Iran employs a number of different methods and mechanisms to implement its foreign policy, including supporting armed factions.

### Financial and Military Support to Allied Regimes and Groups

- Iran provides arms, training, and military advisers in support of allied governments and movements, such as the regime of President Bashar Al Asad of

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

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Erdbrink, "Post-Deal Iran Reappraising 'Great Satan'" *New York Times*, September 18, 2015.

Syria, Lebanese Hezbollah, Hamas, Houthi rebels in Yemen, and Shiite militias in Iraq. Iran supports some Sunni Muslim groups: most Palestinians are Sunni Muslims and several Palestinian FTOs receive Iranian support because they are antagonists of Israel.

- The State Department report on international terrorism for 2016 stated that Iran remained the foremost state sponsor of terrorism in 2016, and continued to play a “destabilizing role” in military conflicts in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. Iran also has been implicated in supporting violent Shiite opposition group attacks in Bahrain. Iran was joined in these efforts by Hizballah.<sup>10</sup>
- DNI Dan Coats, in his annual worldwide threat assessment testimony to Congress on May 11, 2017 and February 13, 2018, said Iran “continues to be the foremost state sponsor of terrorism”<sup>11</sup>—a formulation used by U.S. officials for more than two decades. Many of the groups Iran supports are named as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) by the United States, and because of that support, Iran was placed on the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism (“terrorism list”) in January 1984.<sup>12</sup>
- Some armed factions that Iran supports have not been named as FTOs and have no record of committing acts of international terrorism. Such groups include the Houthi (“Ansar Allah”) movement in Yemen (composed of Zaidi Shiite Muslims) and some underground Shiite opposition factions in Bahrain.
- Iran generally opposes Sunni terrorist groups that work against Iran’s core interests, such as Al Qaeda and the Islamic State organizations.<sup>13</sup> Iran is actively working against the Islamic State organization in Syria and Iraq and, over the past few years, Iran has expelled some Al Qaeda activists who Iran allowed to take refuge there after the September 11, 2001, attacks. However, Iran allowed Al Qaeda senior operatives to transit or reside in Iran possibly as leverage against the United States or Saudi Arabia.
- Iran’s operations in support of its allies—which generally include arms shipments, provision of advisers, training, and funding—are carried out by the Qods (Jerusalem) Force of the IRGC (IRGC-QF). That force is headed by IRGC Major General Qasem Soleimani, who reports directly to Khamene’i.<sup>14</sup> IRGC leaders have on numerous occasions publicly acknowledged these activities.<sup>15</sup> Much of the weaponry Iran supplies to its allies includes specialized anti-tank systems (“explosively-forced projectiles” EFPs), artillery rockets, mortars, short-range missiles, and anti-ship cruise missiles.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>10</sup> The text of the section on Iran can be found at <https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2016/index.htm>.

<sup>11</sup> Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats. Statement for the Record. Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. May 11, 2017; <sup>11</sup> Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats. Statement for the Record. Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. February 13, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> The other two countries still on the terrorism list are Syria and Sudan.

<sup>13</sup> <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/iranians-are-terrified-irans-isis-nightmare-10856>.

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2013/09/30/130930fa\\_fact\\_filkins?printable=true&currentPage=all](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2013/09/30/130930fa_fact_filkins?printable=true&currentPage=all).

<sup>15</sup> *Al Jazeera*, August 20, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Farzin Nadimi. “How Iran’s Revived Weapons Exports Could Boost its Proxies.” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 17, 2015.



**Table I. Major Iran or Iran-Related Terrorism Attacks or Plots**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Incident/Event</b>	<b>Claimed/Likely Perpetrator</b>
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 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—Iran-supported Iraqi Shiite militant group. 17 Da'wa activists charged and imprisoned in Kuwait
March 16, 1984	U.S. Embassy Beirut Political Officer William Buckley taken hostage in Beirut—first in a series of kidnappings there. Last hostage released December 1991.	Factions that eventually formed Hezbollah.
September 20, 1984	Truck bombing of U.S. embassy annex in Beirut. 23 killed.	Factions that eventually 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	Lebanese Hezbollah
February 17, 1988	Col. William Higgins, serving with the a U.N. peacekeeping operation, was kidnapped in southern Lebanon; video of his corpse was released 18 months later.	Lebanese Hezbollah
April 5, 1988	Hijacking of Kuwait Air passenger plane. Two killed.	Lebanese Hezbollah, seeking release of 17 Da'wa prisoners in Kuwait.
March 17, 1992	Bombing of Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires. 29 killed.	Lebanese 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 personnel killed.	Saudi Hezbollah, a Saudi Shiite organization active in eastern Saudi Arabia and supported by Iran. Some assessments point to involvement of 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 confederate allegedly in conjunction with a Mexican drug cartel.
February 13, 2012	Wife of Israeli diplomat wounded in Delhi, India	Lebanese Hezbollah
July 19, 2012	Bombing in Bulgaria killed five Israeli tourists.	Lebanese Hezbollah

**Sources:** Recent State Department Country Reports on Terrorism; various press.

## Other Political Action

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.<sup>17</sup>
- Iran has reportedly provided direct payments to leaders of neighboring states in an effort 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.<sup>18</sup>
- 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.<sup>19</sup>

## Diplomacy

Iran also uses traditional diplomatic tools.

- Iran has an active Foreign Ministry and maintains embassies or representation in all countries with which it has diplomatic relations. Khamene'i has rarely traveled outside Iran as Supreme Leader—and not at all in recent years—but Iran's presidents travel outside Iran frequently, including to Europe or U.N. meetings in New York. Khamene'i and Iran's presidents frequently host foreign leaders in Tehran.
- Iran actively participates in or seeks to join many different international organizations, including those that are dominated by members critical of Iran's policies. Iran has sought to join the World Trade Organization (WTO) since the mid-1990s. Its prospects for being admitted increased by virtue of the JCPOA, but the process of accession is complicated and lengthy. Iran also seeks full membership regional organizations including the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Officials from some SCO countries have said that the JCPOA removed obstacles to Iran's obtaining full membership, but opposition from some members have blocked Iran's accession to date.<sup>20</sup>
- 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 big power influence over global affairs. In August 2012, Iran hosted the NAM annual summit.
- Iran is a party to all major nonproliferation conventions, including the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). Iran insists that it has adhered to all its commitments under these conventions,

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<sup>17</sup> 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.

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/oct/26/iran-cash-payments-to-afghanistan>.

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.crethiplethi.com/subversion-and-exporting-the-islamic-revolution-in-latin-america/islamic-countries/iran-islamic-countries/2012/>.

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.globalresearch.ca/geopolitical-shift-iran-to-become-full-member-of-the-shanghai-cooperation-organization-sco/5465355>.

but the international community asserted that it did not meet all its NPT obligations and that Iran needed to prove that its nuclear program is for purely peaceful purposes. Negotiations between Iran and international powers on this issue began in 2003 and culminated with the July 2015 JCPOA.

- Iran has participated in multilateral negotiations to try to resolve the civil conflict in Syria, most recently in partnership primarily with Russia and Turkey. But, U.S. officials say that Iran's main goal is to ensure Assad's continuation in power.

## Iran's Nuclear and Defense Programs

Iran has pursued 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. These programs are discussed in the following sections.

### Nuclear Program<sup>21</sup>

Iran's nuclear program has been a paramount U.S. concern for successive administrations, in part because Iran's acquisition of an operational nuclear weapon could cause Iran to perceive that it is immune from outside military pressure and could produce a nuclear arms race in one of the world's most volatile regions. Iran might transfer nuclear technology to extremist groups. Israeli leaders characterize an Iranian nuclear weapon as a threat to Israel's existence. Some Iranian leaders argue that a nuclear weapon could end Iran's historic vulnerability to great power invasion, domination, or regime change attempts.

Iran's nuclear program became a significant U.S. national security issue in 2002, when Iran confirmed that it was building a uranium enrichment facility at Natanz and a heavy water production plant at Arak.<sup>22</sup> The perceived threat escalated significantly in 2010, when Iran began enriching uranium to 20% purity, which is relatively easy to enrich further to weapons-grade uranium (90%+). Another requirement for a nuclear weapon is a triggering mechanism that the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) concluded that Iran researched as late as 2009. The United States and its partners also have insisted that Iran must not possess a nuclear-capable missile, and President Donald Trump, in a January 12, 2018, statement, said that U.S. policy should explicitly link Iran's ballistic missile program with its nuclear program.<sup>23</sup>

### Iran's Nuclear Intentions and Activities

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 cite Supreme Leader Khamene'i's 2003 formal pronouncement (*fatwa*) that nuclear weapons are un-Islamic as evidence that a nuclear weapon is inconsistent with Iran's ideology. On February 22, 2012, Khamene'i stated that the production of and use of a nuclear weapon is prohibited as a "great sin," and that stockpiling such weapons is "futile, expensive, and harmful."<sup>24</sup> Some have argued

<sup>21</sup> More extensive information on Iran's nuclear program can be found in CRS Report R43333, *Iran Nuclear Agreement*, by Kenneth Katzman and Paul K. Kerr.

<sup>22</sup> 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.

<sup>23</sup> White House Office of the Press Secretary. Statement by the President on the Iran Nuclear Deal. January 12, 2018.

<sup>24</sup> "Leader Says West Knows Iran Not Seeking 'Nuclear Weapons,'" Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran Network, February 22, 2012.

that an attempt by Iran to develop a nuclear weapon would stimulate a regional arms race or trigger Israeli or U.S. military action.

Iranian leaders assert that Iran's nuclear program was always intended for civilian uses, including medicine and electricity generation. Iran argued 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 by international suppliers. U.S. officials have said that Iran's use of nuclear energy is acceptable. 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 for its nuclear program. But, even before the JCPOA, there were no assertions that Iran had diverted nuclear material for a nuclear weapons program.<sup>25</sup>

### ***Nuclear Weapons Time Frame Estimates***

Prior to the JCPOA, then-Vice President Biden told a Washington, DC, research institute on April 30, 2015, that Iran could likely have enough fissile material for a nuclear weapon within two to three months of a decision to manufacture that material. U.S. officials said that the JCPOA increased the "breakout time"—an all-out effort by Iran to develop a nuclear weapon using declared facilities or undeclared covert facilities—to at least 12 months.

A key to the "breakout time" is Iran's capacity to make fissile material. When the JCPOA was agreed, Iran had about 19,000 total installed centrifuges to enrich uranium, of which about 10,000 were operating. Prior to the interim nuclear agreement (Joint Plan of Action, JPA), Iran had a stockpile of 400 lbs of 20% enriched uranium (short of the 550 lbs. that would be needed to produce one nuclear weapon). Weapons grade uranium is uranium that is enriched to 90%.

Under the JCPOA, Iran is allowed to operate only 6,100 centrifuges and was required to reduce its stockpile of 3.67% enriched uranium to 300 kilograms (660 lbs.). These restrictions start to come off beginning in mid-January 2026—10 years from Implementation Day (January 16, 2016). 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 has agreed to limit its stockpile of heavy water to agreed levels. At times when Iran has temporarily exceeded the allowed amounts of heavy water, it has exported excess amounts (including to the United States) to reduce its holdings below threshold levels.

### ***Bushehr Reactor/Russia to Build Additional Reactors***

The JCPOA does not prohibit operation or new construction of civilian nuclear plants such as the one Russia built at Bushehr. Under their 1995 bilateral agreement commissioning the construction, Russia supplies nuclear fuel for that plant and takes back the spent nuclear material for reprocessing. Russia delayed opening the plant apparently to pressure Iran on the nuclear issue, but it became provisionally operational in September 2012.

In November 2014, Russia and Iran reached agreement for Russia to build two more reactors—and possibly as many as six more beyond that—at Bushehr and other sites. Russia is to supply and reprocess all fuel for these reactors. In January 2015, Iran announced it would proceed with

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<sup>25</sup> 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. <http://lewis.armscontrolwonk.com/files/2011/02/gov2011-7.pdf>.

the construction of two such plants at Bushehr. Because all nuclear fuel and reprocessing is supplied externally, these plants are not considered a significant proliferation concern and were not addressed in the JCPOA.

### **International Diplomatic Efforts to Address Iran's Nuclear Program**

The JCPOA was the product of a long international effort to persuade Iran to negotiate limits on its nuclear program. That effort began when it was revealed by the United States that Iran was building facilities to enrich uranium. In 2003, France, Britain, and Germany (the "EU-3") opened a diplomatic track to negotiate curbs on Iran's program. On October 21, 2003, Iran pledged, in return for 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 more specific 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 the agreement with a March 11, 2005, announcement by dropping the U.S. objection to Iran's applying to join the World Trade Organization (WTO). The Paris Agreement broke down in 2005 when Iran rejected an EU-3 proposal for a permanent nuclear agreement 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<sup>26</sup> to refer the case to the Security Council. The Council set an April 29, 2006, deadline to cease enrichment.

*"P5+1" Formed.* In May 2006, the Bush Administration joined the talks, triggering an expanded negotiating group called the "Permanent Five Plus 1" (P5+1: United States, Russia, China, France, Britain, and Germany). A P5+1 offer to Iran on June 6, 2006, guaranteed Iran nuclear fuel (Annex I to Resolution 1747) and threatened sanctions if Iran did not agree (sanctions were imposed in subsequent years).<sup>27</sup>

### **U.N. Security Council Resolutions Adopted**

The U.N. Security Council subsequently imposed sanctions on Iran in an effort to shift Iran's calculations toward compromise. A table outlining the provisions of the U.N. Security Council Resolutions on Iran's nuclear program can be found in CRS Report RS20871, *Iran Sanctions*, by Kenneth Katzman. (The resolutions below, as well as Resolution 1929, were formally superseded on January 16, 2016, by Resolution 2231.)

- *Resolution 1696* (July 31, 2006). The Security Council voted 14-1 (Qatar voting no) for U.N. Security Council Resolution 1696, giving Iran until August 31, 2006, to suspend enrichment suspension, suspend construction of the Arak heavy-water reactor, and ratify the Additional Protocol to Iran's IAEA Safeguards Agreement. It was passed under Article 40 of the U.N. Charter, which makes compliance mandatory, but not under Article 41, which refers to economic sanctions, or Article 42, which authorizes military action.
- *Resolution 1737* (December 23, 2006). After Iran refused a proposal to temporarily suspend enrichment, the Security Council adopted U.N. Security

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<sup>26</sup> Voting no: Cuba, Syria, Venezuela. Abstaining: Algeria, Belarus, Indonesia, Libya, South Africa.

<sup>27</sup> One source purports to have obtained the contents of the package from ABC News: <http://www.basicint.org/pubs/Notes/BN060609.htm>.

Council Resolution 1737 unanimously, under Chapter 7, Article 41 of the U.N. Charter. It demanded enrichment suspension by February 21, 2007, prohibited sale to Iran of nuclear technology, and required U.N. member states to freeze the financial assets of named Iranian nuclear and missile firms and related persons.

- *Resolution 1747* (March 24, 2007) Resolution 1747, adopted unanimously, demanded Iran suspend enrichment by May 24, 2007. It added entities to those sanctioned by Resolution 1737 and banned arms transfers by Iran (a provision directed at stopping Iran's arms supplies to its regional allies and proxies). It called for countries to cease selling Iran arms or dual use items and for countries and international financial institutions to avoid giving Iran any new loans or grants (except loans for humanitarian purposes).
- *Resolution 1803* (March 3, 2008) Adopted by a vote of 14-0 (and Indonesia abstaining), Resolution 1803 added persons and entities to those sanctioned; banned travel outright by certain sanctions persons; banned virtually all sales of dual use items to Iran; and authorized inspections of Iran Air Cargo and Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Line shipments, if there is cause to believe that the shipments contain banned goods. In May 2008, the P5+1 added political and enhanced energy cooperation with Iran to previous incentives, and the enhanced offer was attached as an Annex to Resolution 1929 (see below).
- *Resolution 1835* (September 27, 2008). In July 2008, Iran indicated it might be ready to accept a temporary "freeze for freeze": the P5+1 would impose no new sanctions and Iran would stop expanding uranium enrichment. No agreement on that concept was reached, even though the Bush Administration sent an Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs to a P5+1-Iran meeting in Geneva in July 2008. Resolution 1835 demanded compliance but did not add any sanctions.

## Developments during the Obama Administration

The P5+1 met in February 2009 to incorporate the Obama Administration's stated commitment to direct U.S. engagement with Iran and,<sup>28</sup> 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 was deemed a basis for further talks, and an October 1, 2009, P5+1-Iran meeting in Geneva 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. However, the Supreme Leader reportedly opposed Iran's concessions as excessive and the agreement was not 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.<sup>29</sup> Iran submitted to the IAEA an acceptance letter, but the Administration rejected the plan as failing to address enrichment to the 20% level.

<sup>28</sup> Dempsey, Judy. "U.S. Urged to Talk With Iran." *International Herald Tribune*, February 5, 2009.

<sup>29</sup> Text of the pact is at <http://www.cfr.org/publication/22140/>.

## ***U.N. Security Council Resolution 1929***

Immediately after the Brazil-Turkey mediation failed, then-Secretary of State Clinton announced that the P5+1 had reached agreement 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,<sup>30</sup> Resolution 1929, was pivotal insofar as it authorized U.N. member states to sanction key Iranian economic sectors such as energy and banking, thereby placing significant additional economic pressure on Iran. An annex presented a modified offer of incentives to Iran.<sup>31</sup>

Resolution 1929 produced no immediate breakthrough in talks. Negotiations on December 6-7, 2010, in Geneva and January 21-22, 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 halt enrichment to the 20% level; close the Fordow facility; and remove its stockpile of 20% enriched uranium.

## ***Joint Plan of Action (JPA)***

The June 2013 election of Rouhani as Iran's president improved the prospects for a nuclear settlement and, in advance of his visit to the U.N. General Assembly in New York during September 23-27, 2013, Rouhani stated that the Supreme Leader had given him authority to negotiate a nuclear deal. The Supreme Leader affirmed that authority in a speech on September 17, 2013, stating that he believes in the concept of "heroic flexibility"—adopting "proper and logical diplomatic moves...."<sup>32</sup> An agreement on an interim nuclear agreement, the "Joint Plan of Action" (JPA), was announced on November 24, 2013, providing modest sanctions relief in exchange for Iran to (1) eliminating its stockpile of 20% enriched uranium, (2) ceasing to enrich to that level, and (3) not increasing its stockpile of 3.5% enriched uranium.

## ***The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)***<sup>33</sup>

P5+1-Iran negotiations on a comprehensive settlement began in February 2014 but missed several self-imposed deadlines. On April 2, 2015, the parties reached a framework for a JCPOA, and the JCPOA was finalized 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). 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 JCPOA**

The Trump Administration has 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

<sup>30</sup> It was adopted by a vote of 12-2 (Turkey and Brazil voting no) with one abstention (Lebanon).

<sup>31</sup> Text of the resolution is at [http://www.isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/Draft\\_resolution\\_on\\_Iran\\_annexes.pdf](http://www.isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/Draft_resolution_on_Iran_annexes.pdf).

<sup>32</sup> Open Source Center, "Iran: Leader Outlines Guard Corps Role, Talks of 'Heroic Flexibility,'" published September 18, 2013.

<sup>33</sup> For detail on the JCPOA, see CRS Report R43333, *Iran Nuclear Agreement*, by Kenneth Katzman and Paul K. Kerr.

expiration of key nuclear restrictions.<sup>34</sup> The Administration initially certified Iranian compliance (every 90 days) under the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act (INARA, P.L. 114-17), but as of October 15, 2017, the President has not certified Iranian compliance on the grounds that sanctions relief is not proportional to the limitations on Iran's nuclear program. The non-certification enabled Congress to act under expedited rules to re-impose U.S. sanctions, but Congress has not taken such action to date.

President Trump has, to date, renewed all waivers of U.S. sanctions required to continue implementing U.S. JCPOA commitments. In speeches and statements on October 13, 2017, and January 12, 2018, the President has threatened to re-impose sanctions (and withdraw the United States from the JCPOA) unless Congress and the European countries act to (1) extend the JCPOA's nuclear restrictions beyond current deadlines to ensure that Iran never comes close to developing a nuclear weapon; (2) impose strict sanctions on Iran's development of ballistic missiles; and (3) ensure that Iran allows "immediate" access to any site that the IAEA wants to visit. Separately, President Trump and other U.S. officials have insisted that U.S. allies address Iran's "malign activities" in the region. Iran has rejected any renegotiation of the JCPOA's terms, although Iranian leaders have reportedly signaled they might be willing to entertain talks about new limits on Iran's ballistic missile program. Congress and the European countries appear to be taking some steps to try to meet President Trump's requirements but it appears unlikely that the European countries—who assert that the JCPOA is working and cannot be renegotiated—are willing to meet all of his stipulated conditions. The President's intent might become clear on May 12, 2018, when a key sanctions waiver next expires.

## **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.

### **Chemical and Biological Weapons**

U.S. reports indicate that Iran has the capability to produce chemical warfare (CW) agents and "probably" has the capability to produce some biological warfare agents for offensive purposes, if it made the decision to do so.<sup>35</sup> This raises questions about Iran's compliance with its obligations under the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), which Iran signed on January 13, 1993, and ratified on June 8, 1997. 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.

### **Missiles<sup>36</sup>**

U.S. officials assert that Iran's missile arsenal in the region, posing a potential threat to U.S. allies in the region, as well as to U.S. ships and forces in the region. DNI Coats testified on May 11, 2017, that "Iran's ballistic missiles are inherently capable of delivering WMD" and that Iran

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<sup>34</sup> Department of State. Press Briefing by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. August 1, 2017.

<sup>35</sup> Deputy Director of National Intelligence for Analysis, "Unclassified Report to Congress on the Acquisition of Technology Relating to Weapons of Mass Destruction and Advanced Conventional Munitions, Covering 1 January to 31 December 2010," March 2011.

<sup>36</sup> For more information on Iran's missile arsenal, see CRS Report R42849, *Iran's Ballistic Missile and Space Launch Programs*, by Steven A. Hildreth.



“already has the largest inventory of ballistic missiles in the Middle East.” The intelligence directors added that Iran “can strike targets up to 2,000 kilometers from Iran’s borders.”

Still, Iran is not known to possess an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) capability (missiles of ranges over 2,900 miles). And, 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.<sup>37</sup> If there is a decision to do so, progress on Iran’s space program could shorten the pathway to an ICBM because space launch vehicles use similar technology. Iran’s missile programs are run by the IRGC Air Force, particularly the IRGC Air Force 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 from published material whether North Korea and Iran have recently exchanged any actual missile hardware.

At the more tactical level, Iran is acquiring and developing many types of short range ballistic and cruise missiles that Iran’s forces can use and transfer to regional allies and proxies to protect them and to enhance Iran’s ability to project power. The DNI’s May 11, 2017, testimony states that Iran “continues to develop a range of new military capabilities to monitor and target US and allied military assets in the region, including armed UAVs... advanced naval mines, submarines and advanced torpedoes, and anti-ship and land-attack cruise missiles.”

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.

- 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. The tests occurred prior to the taking effect of Resolution 2231 on January 16, 2016 (Implementation Day).
- 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. It is not clear whether North Korea provided any technology or had any involvement in the test.<sup>38</sup>
- On January 29, 2017, Iran tested what Trump Administration officials called a version of the Shahab missile, although press reports say the test failed when the missile exploded after traveling about 600 miles.
- On July 27, 2017, Iran’s *Simorgh* rocket launched a satellite into space.
- On several occasions since the JCPOA was finalized, Iran has tested short-range ballistic missiles.

<sup>37</sup> “Iran: No Need to Extend 2,000 km Ballistic Missile Range.” Al Jazeera, October 31, 2017.

<sup>38</sup> Lucas Tomlinson. “Iran Conducts 4<sup>th</sup> Missile Test Since Signing Nuke Deal.” *Fox News*, July 15, 2016.

### ***U.S. and U.N. Responses to Iran's Missile Tests***

The Obama Administration termed Iran's post-Implementation Day ballistic missile tests as "provocative and destabilizing," "inconsistent with" Resolution 2231—stopping short of accusing Iran of "violation" of 2231. Trump Administration officials have used similar formulations for the tests in 2017, with the exception of the July 27 space launch—which the Administration termed a "violation"—because of that technology's inherent capability to carry a nuclear warhead. The U.N. Security Council referred the 2016 and 2017 tests to its sanctions committee but has not imposed any additional sanctions on Iran to date.

On several occasions in 2015 and 2016, the Obama Administration designated additional firms for sanctions under Executive Order 13382. The Trump Administration has, on several occasions, sanctioned Iran missile-related entities under E.O. 13382 and under the Iran, North Korea, and Syria Nonproliferation Act. And, as noted, the Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions (P.L. 115-44), mandates sanctioning entities that assist Iran's missile program. In his January 12, 2018, statement, President Trump demanded, as a condition of remaining in the JCPOA, enactment of legislation that explicitly states that Iran's "long-range missile and nuclear weapons programs are inseparable" and that Iran's development and testing of missiles should be subject to "severe sanctions."

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

Iran asserts that conventionally armed missiles are an integral part of its defense strategy and the tests will continue. Iran argues that it is not developing a nuclear weapon and therefore is not designing its missile to carry a nuclear weapon. Iranian officials say they will not negotiate any new curbs on Iran's missile program.

### ***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. Through sales of the Patriot system (PAC-3) and more advanced "THAAD" (Theater High Altitude Area Defense) to the Gulf states, the United States has sought to organize a coordinated GCC missile defense system.

The United States has sought a defense against an eventual long-range Iranian missile system. U.S. efforts in that regard have focused on emplacing missile defense systems in various Eastern European countries and on ship-based systems. The United States has helped Israel develop the Arrow missile defense system that is intended to intercept Iranian (or other) ballistic missiles launched at Israel. Other Israeli systems developed with U.S. help, including Iron Dome and David's Sling, are intended to intercept rockets launched by Iranian allies and proxies such as Hezbollah and Hamas. The FY2013 national defense authorization act (P.L. 112-239) contained provisions urging the Administration to undertake more extensive efforts, in cooperation with U.S. partners and others, to defend against the missile programs of Iran (and North Korea).

**Table 2. Iran's Missile Arsenal**

Shahab-3 ("Meteor")	The 600-mile range missile is operational, and Defense Department (DOD) reports indicate Tehran is improving its lethality and effectiveness.
Shahab-3 "Variants"	Iran appears to be developing several extended-range variants of the Shahab, under a variety of names including: Sijil, Ashoura, Emad, Ghadr, and Khorramshahr. These missiles have ranges of about 1,000–1,200 miles, putting the entire Middle East region within reach from Iran. Some use solid fuel and others use liquid fuel. Some Shahab variants inscribed with the phrase "Israel must be wiped off the face of the earth"—were launched on March 8-9, 2016.
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 own version of this missile in July 2016.
Short Range Ballistic Missiles and Cruise Missiles	Iran fields a wide variety of increasingly capable short-range ballistic and anti-ship cruise missiles, according to DOD reports, including the ability to change course in flight. One short-range ballistic missile (the Qiam, with 400 mile range) was first tested in August 2010. Iran has also developed 150–200 mile-range Fateh 110 and 313 and Hormuz solid fuel missiles and a related Khaliji Fars (Persian Gulf) anti-ship ballistic missile. Iran has armed its patrol boats (and supplied allies and proxies) with Chinese-made C-802 anti-ship cruise missiles and Iranian variants of that weapon. Iran also has C-802s and other missiles emplaced along Iran's coast, including the Chinese-made CSSC-2 (Silkworm) and the CSSC-3 (Seersucker). Iran also possesses a few hundred short-range ballistic missiles, including the <i>Shahab-1</i> (Scud-b), the <i>Shahab-2</i> (Scud-C), and the <i>Tondar-69</i> (CSS-8).
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). Iran claimed additional satellite launches subsequently, including the launch and return of a vehicle carrying a small primate in December 2013. Since March 2016, Iran has been reported to readying the <i>Simorgh</i> vehicle for a space launch, and the launch occurred on July 27, 2017.
Warheads	<i>Wall Street Journal</i> report of September 14, 2005, said that U.S. intelligence believes Iran is working 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. <sup>39</sup> No further information has been reported since.

**Sources:** Testimony of U.S. intelligence community officials, 2005-2018, various press;

## Conventional and "Asymmetric Warfare" Capability<sup>40</sup>

Iran's leaders have repeatedly warned that Iran would take military action if Iran is attacked. Iran's forces are widely assessed as incapable of defeating the United States in a classic military confrontation, but they are potentially able to do significant damage to U.S. forces. Iran appears to be able to defend against any conceivable aggression from Iran's neighbors, while lacking the ability to deploy concentrated armed force across long distances or waterways. However, CENTCOM Commander Gen. Joseph Votel testified on February 27, 2018, that Iran's ground forces are "improving their ability to quickly mobilize and deploy in response to internal and external threats."

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

<sup>40</sup> 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.

Iran is able to project power against U.S. and U.S.-allied interests in the region not necessarily through conventional military power but by supporting friendly governments and proxy forces.

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 Eghelab Islami*)<sup>41</sup> 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 and it and the regular military (*Artesh*)—the national army that existed under the former Shah—report to a joint headquarters. In June 2016, Supreme Leader Khamene'i replaced the longtime Chief of Staff (head) of the Joint Headquarters with IRGC Major General Mohammad Hossein Bagheri, an early recruit to the IRGC 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. On the other hand, Rouhani's August 2017 appointment of a senior *Artesh* figure, Brigadier General Amir Hatami, as Defense Minister for Rouhani's second term cabinet, suggests that the *Artesh* remains a viable and respected institution in the defense establishment. The *Artesh* is deployed mainly at bases outside cities and has no internal security role.

The IRGC Navy and regular Navy (Islamic Republic of Iran Navy, IRIN) are distinct forces; the IRIN has responsibility for the Gulf of Oman, whereas the IRGC Navy has responsibility for the closer-in Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz. The regular Air Force controls most of Iran's combat aircraft, whereas the IRGC Air Force runs Iran's ballistic missile programs. Iran has a small number of warships on its Caspian Sea coast. Since 2014, Iran sent warships into the Atlantic Ocean on a few occasions as a demonstration of growing naval strength.

### Asymmetric Warfare Capacity

Iran tries to compensate for its conventional military deficiencies by developing a capacity for "asymmetric warfare." Defense Department reports and intelligence community testimony continues to assess that Iran is developing forces and tactics to control the approaches to Iran, including the Strait of Hormuz, and that the IRGC-QF remains a key tool of Iran's "foreign policy and power projection." Iran's naval strategy appears to be center on developing an ability to "swarm" U.S. naval assets with its fleet of small boats and large numbers of anti-ship cruise missiles and its inventory of coastal defense cruise missiles (such as the Silkworm or Seersucker). It is also developing increasingly lethal systems such as more advanced naval mines and "small but capable submarines," according to the 2016 DOD report. 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 frequently conduct "high-speed intercepts" or close-approaches of U.S. naval vessels in the Persian Gulf, sometimes causing U.S. evasive action or warning shots.

Iran's arming of regional allies and proxies represents another aspect of Iran's development of asymmetric warfare capabilities. The FY2016 DOD report on Iran's military power, cited earlier, states that "The IRGC-QF continues to seek improved access within foreign countries and to support proxy groups to advance Iran's interests." Arming allies and proxies helps Iran expand its influence with little direct risk, gives Tehran a measure of deniability, and serves as a "force multiplier." Iran's provision of anti-ship and coastal defense missiles to the Houthi rebels in Yemen, discussed further below, could represent an effort by Tehran to project military power into

<sup>41</sup> For a more extensive discussion of the IRGC, see Katzman, Kenneth, "The Warriors of Islam: Iran's Revolutionary Guard," *Westview Press*, 1993.

the key Bab el-Mandeb Strait chokepoint. In the event of confrontation, Iran could try to retaliate against an adversary through terrorist attacks inside the United States or against U.S. embassies and facilities in Europe or the Persian Gulf. Iran could also try to direct Iran-supported forces in Afghanistan or Iraq to attack U.S. personnel there. Iran's support for regional terrorist groups and other armed factions was a key justification for Iran's addition to the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism ("terrorism list") in January 1984.

### **Military-to-Military Relationships**

Iran's armed forces have few formal relationships with foreign militaries outside the region. Iran's military-to-military relationships with Russia, China, Ukraine, Belarus, and North Korea generally have focused on Iranian arms purchases or upgrades, but Iran and Russia are cooperating militarily in Syria to assist the Assad regime. 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.<sup>42</sup>

Iran and India have a "strategic dialogue" and some Iranian naval officers reportedly underwent some training in India in the 1990s. Iran's military also conducted joint exercises with the Pakistani armed forces in the early 1990s. 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,<sup>43</sup> 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.

### **Arms Purchases 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 requires (for a maximum of five years from Adoption Day—until October 17, 2020) Security Council approval for any transfer of weapons or military technology, or related training or financial assistance, to Iran. The Resolution names the weapons systems subject to the restriction as:

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....

Still, Defense Minister Hossein Dehghan 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.

<sup>42</sup> 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.

<sup>43</sup> Thomas Erdbrink and Chris Buckley. "China's Navy Sends Ships for Exercises with Iran." *New York Times*, September 22, 2014.

Resolution 2231 also requires Security Council approval for Iranian transfers of any weaponry outside Iran. This restriction expires five years from Adoption Day (October 17, 2020). Separate U.N. Security Council resolutions ban arms shipments to such conflict areas as Yemen (Resolution 2216) and Lebanon (Resolution 1701). There is no U.N. ban on arms exports to Syria.

## Defense Budget

Iran's defense budget generally runs about 4% of GDP, or about \$20 billion. 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. Iran's national budget is about \$300 billion.

**Table 3. Iran's Conventional Military Arsenal**

**Military and Security Personnel:** 700,000 total. Regular army ground force is about 350,000, Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) ground force is about 125,000. 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. Security forces number about 40,000-60,000 law enforcement forces, with another 100,000 Basij (volunteer militia under IRGC control) permanently deployed. 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; 18 IRGC-controlled Chinese-made patrol boats, several hundred small boats.) Also has 3 Kilo subs (reg. Navy controlled). Iran has been long said to possess several small subs, possibly purchased assembled or in kit form from North Korea. 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.

**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 Rockets.** Iran has developed "Explosively Formed Projectiles" (EFPs) anti-tank rockets used to significant effect against U.S. forces in Iraq (2003-11). Iran provides the weapon to its regional allies and proxies.

**Anti-aircraft Missile Systems:** Iran has 150+ U.S.-made I-Hawk (from Iran-Contra Affair) plus possibly 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, Russian officials indicated they would proceed with the S-300 delivery, and the weapon is operational as of 2018. Iran reportedly also seeks to buy the S-400 anti-aircraft system from Russia.

**Sources:** IISS Military Balance (2017)—Section on Middle East and North Africa, and various press reports. Testimony of CENTCOM Commander Gen. 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...." Its overall commander, IRGC Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari, who has been in the position since September 2007, is considered a hardliner against political dissent and a close ally of the Supreme Leader. He criticized Rouhani for accepting a phone call from President Obama on September 27, 2013, and opposed major concessions in the JCPOA negotiations.

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 commander, Brigadier General Qassem Soleimani, reportedly has an independent channel to Khamene'i. The IRGC-QF numbers approximately 10,000-15,000 personnel 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 is advising the Iraqi government against the Islamic State (also known as ISIS or ISIL)—tacitly aligning it there with U.S. forces. Section 1223 of the FY2016 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 114-92) required a DOD report any U.S. military interaction with the IRGC-QF, presumably in Iraq. The IRGC-QF commander during 1988-1995 was Brigadier General Ahmad Vahidi, who served as defense minister during 2009-2013. He led the QF when it allegedly assisted Lebanese Hezbollah carry out two bombings of Israeli and Jewish targets in Buenos Aires (1992 and 1994) and is wanted by Interpol. He allegedly recruited Saudi Hezbollah activists later accused of the June 1996 Khobar Towers bombing.

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. The *Wall Street Journal* reported on May 27, 2014, that *Khatam ol-Anbiya* has \$50 billion in contracts with the Iranian government, including in the energy sector but also in port and highway construction. It has as many as 40,000 employees.

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.

**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](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2013/09/30/130930fa_fact_filkins?printable=true&currentPage=all).

## Iran's Regional and International Activities

The following sections analyze Iran's actions in its region and more broadly, in the context of Iran's national security strategy.

### Near East Region

The focus of Iranian security policy is the Near East, where Iran employs all instruments of its national power. Successive Administrations have described many of Iran's regional operations as "malign activities." Testifying before the House Armed Services Committee on March 29, 2017, the commander of U.S. Central Command stated that "It is my view that Iran poses the greatest long-term threat to stability in this part of the world." Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats, in his February 13, 2018, annual worldwide threat assessment testimony before Congress, assessed that "Iran will seek to expand its influence in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, where it sees conflicts generally trending in Tehran's favor..." In his March 19, 2018, message on the occasion of Persian New Year 2018 (Nowruz), President Trump stated that since 2012, the IRGC has spent more than \$16 billion to "prop up Syria's government and support militants and terrorists in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen."<sup>44</sup> Perhaps because countering Iran's regional influence would require significant U.S. commitments in several conflicts in the region, President Trump did not announce any major new steps to counter Iran's malign activities in his October 13, 2017, announcement of his administration's Iran policy.

### The Persian Gulf

Iran has a 1,100-mile coastline on the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman. The Persian Gulf monarchy states (Gulf Cooperation Council, GCC: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates) have always been a key focus of Iran's foreign policy. In 1981, perceiving a threat from revolutionary Iran and spillover from the Iran-Iraq War that began in September 1980, the six Gulf states—Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates—formed the GCC alliance. U.S.-GCC security cooperation, developed during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War, expanded significantly after the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Prior to 2003 the extensive U.S. presence in the Gulf was also intended to contain Saddam Hussein's Iraq, but, with Iraq militarily weak since the fall of Saddam Hussein, the U.S. military presence in the Gulf focuses on containing Iran and conducting operations against regional terrorist groups. The GCC states host significant numbers of U.S. forces at their military facilities and procure sophisticated U.S. military equipment.

**Figure 1. Map of Near East**



**Source:** Created by CRS.

<sup>44</sup> White House. "Statement by President Donald J. Trump on Nowruz." March 19, 2018.



Several of the GCC leaders have accused Iran of fomenting unrest among Shiite communities in the GCC states, particularly those in the Eastern Provinces of Saudi Arabia and in Bahrain, which has a majority Shiite population. At the same time, all the GCC states maintain relatively normal trading relations with Iran, and some have undertaken joint energy and infrastructure projects with it. In early 2017, Iran sought to ease tensions with the GCC countries in an exchange of letters and a February 2017 visit by President Hassan Rouhani to Kuwait and Oman, but the same regional issues that divide Iran and the GCC countries thwarted the initiative.

The willingness of Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman to engage Iran 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.<sup>45</sup> The rift has given Iran an opportunity to accomplish a long-standing goal of weakening the GCC alliance, in part by increasing its food exports to Qatar to compensate for imports from Saudi Arabia. In August 2017, Qatar restored full diplomatic relations with Tehran. The GCC rift came two weeks after President Donald Trump visited Saudi Arabia and expressed strong support for its policies.

An additional U.S. and GCC concern is the Iranian threat to the long-asserted core U.S. interest 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. The Strait of Hormuz is identified by the Energy Information Administration as a key potential “chokepoint” for the world economy. Each day, about 17 million barrels of oil flow through the strait, which is 35% of all seaborne traded oil and 20% of all worldwide traded oil.<sup>46</sup> U.S. and GCC officials view Iran as a threat to the free flow of oil and freedom of navigation in the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz, and CENTCOM Commander Gen. Joseph Votel testified before the House Armed Services Committee on February 27, 2018, that: “With little warning, Iran could quickly close the Strait of Hormuz using stockpiles of naval mines and disrupt key maritime chokepoints throughout the region.” Some GCC states are developing oil export pipelines that avoid the Strait of Hormuz. 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—stoppages possibly intended to demonstrate Iran’s potential ability to control the strait. The following sections analyze the main outlines of Iran’s policy toward each GCC state.

### *Saudi Arabia*<sup>47</sup>

Iranian and Saudi leaders accuse each other of seeking hegemony and to exclude the other from regional influence. Saudi leaders also accuse Iran of supporting Shiite dissidents in the kingdom’s largely Shiite Eastern Province. The mutual animosity has aggravated sectarian tensions and contributed to an Iran-Saudi regional war by proxy.<sup>48</sup> Iran’s arming of the Houthi rebels in Yemen has increased Iran’s potential to threaten the Kingdom militarily, and Saudi Arabia has blamed Iran directly for supplying the Houthis with ballistic missiles that have been fired on the Kingdom on several occasions. For its part, in late 2017 Saudi leaders sought to undermine Hezbollah’s influence in Lebanon by reportedly pressuring that country’s Prime Minister, Sa’d Hariri, to

<sup>45</sup> The intra-GCC rift with Qatar has many antecedents beyond differences over Iran policy, as discussed in CRS Insight IN10712, *Qatar and its Neighbors: Disputes and Possible Implications*, by Kenneth Katzman and Christopher M. Blanchard, and CRS Report R44533, *Qatar: Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy*, by Kenneth Katzman.

<sup>46</sup> <http://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.cfm?id=18991>.

<sup>47</sup> 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.

<sup>48</sup> Statement for the Record. U.S. Director for National Intelligence James Clapper. Senate Armed Services Committee, February 2015, p. 14.

resign as head of a coalition government that includes Hezbollah. On Iraq, both Iran and Saudi Arabia back the Shiite-dominated government, although Saudi leaders have criticized that government for sectarianism whereas Iran supports Baghdad relatively uncritically. Since mid-2017, Saudi leaders, with U.S. backing, have sought to engage Baghdad to draw it closer to the Arab world and away from Iran.

The Saudi-Iran rift expanded in January 2016 when 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. In December 2016, Saudi Arabia executed 15 Saudi Shiites sentenced to death for "spying" for Iran.

Saudi leaders have criticized the JCPOA's shortfalls in terms similar to those used by the Trump Administration, but Saudi officials support the accord's continuation. Still, perhaps lacking confidence in the JCPOA's ability to prevent a nuclear-armed Iran long term, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman Al Saudi, on the eve of a March 20, 2018, meeting with President Trump, stated that Saudi Arabia would acquire a nuclear weapon if Iran does. Saudi Arabia is seeking to forge a civilian nuclear cooperation agreement with the United States, perhaps in part to signal to Iran that it will not have a monopoly in the Gulf on nuclear technology.

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 accuses it of sheltering the alleged mastermind of the bombing, Ahmad Mughassil, a leader of Saudi Hezbollah. Mughassil was arrested in Beirut in August 2015.

### ***United Arab Emirates (UAE)***<sup>49</sup>

The UAE is aligned with Saudi Arabia against Iran, opposing extensive diplomatic engagement and becoming a core member of the Saudi-led coalition against the Houthi rebels in Yemen. UAE leaders blamed Iran for arming the Houthis with anti-ship missiles that damaged a UAE naval vessel in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait in late 2016. As noted above, the UAE withdrew its ambassador from Iran in solidarity with Saudi Arabia in connection with the Nimr execution in January 2016. The UAE has criticized the deficiencies of the JCPOA but supports its continuation as a stabilizing force in the region.

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

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<sup>49</sup> For detailed information on Iran-UAE relations, see CRS Report RS21852, *The United Arab Emirates (UAE): Issues for U.S. Policy*, by Kenneth Katzman.

removed some military equipment from the islands.<sup>50</sup> However, no resolution has been announced. The GCC has consistently backed the UAE position.

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, including branch offices of large trading companies based in Tehran and elsewhere in Iran.

### ***Qatar***<sup>51</sup>

Since 1995, Qatar has occupied a “middle ground” between anti-Iran animosity and sustained engagement with Iran. Qatar maintains periodic high-level contact with Iran; 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. Qatar also pursues policies that are opposed to Iran’s interests, for example by providing arms and funds to factions in Syria opposed to Syrian President Bashar Al Asad and by joining Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen (which ceased after Qatar pulled out of Yemen as a consequence of the intra-GCC rift). Qatar has sometimes used its engagement with Iran to obtain the release of prisoners held by Iran or its allies, and strongly refutes Saudi-led assertions that it is aligned with or politically close to Iran. Qatar did withdraw its Ambassador from Iran in connection with the Nimr execution discussed above, but restored relations in August 2017 in large part to reciprocate Iran’s support for Qatar in the intra-GCC rift.

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***<sup>52</sup>

Bahrain, ruled by the Sunni Al Khalifa family and still unsettled by unrest among its majority Shiite population, is a strident critic of Iran. Bahrain’s leaders consistently allege that Iran is agitating Bahrain’s Shiite community, some of which is of Persian origin, to try to overturn Bahrain’s power structure. In 1981 and again in 1996, Bahrain publicly claimed to have thwarted Iran-backed efforts by Bahraini Shiite dissidents to violently overthrow the ruling family. Bahrain has consistently accused Iran of supporting radical Shiite factions that are part of a broader and mostly peaceful uprising begun in 2011 by mostly Shiite demonstrators.<sup>53</sup> On several occasions, Bahrain has temporarily withdrawn its Ambassador from Iran following Iranian criticism of Bahrain’s treatment of its Shiite population or alleged Iranian involvement in purported anti-government plots. In June 2016, Iran used Bahrain’s measures against key Shiite opposition leaders to issue renewed threats against the Al Khalifa regime. Bahrain broke ties with Iran in concert with Saudi Arabia in January 2016 over the Nimr execution dispute.

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<sup>50</sup> <http://archive.defensenews.com/article/20140115/DEFREG04/301150034/Source-UAE-Iran-Reach-Accord-Disputed-Hormuz-Islands>.

<sup>51</sup> For detailed information on Iran-Qatar relations, see CRS Report R44533, *Qatar: Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy*, by Kenneth Katzman.

<sup>52</sup> For detailed information on Iran-Bahrain relations, see CRS Report 95-1013, *Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy*, by Kenneth Katzman.

<sup>53</sup> <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/01/bahrain-accuses-iran-training-rebels-201413144049814960.html>.

Some reports indicate that Iran's efforts to support violent factions in Bahrain includes providing weapons, explosives, and weapons-making equipment. In late 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 Shiite militias used against U.S. armor in Iraq during 2004–2011. No EFPs have actually been used in Bahrain, to date.<sup>54</sup> On January 1, 2017, 10 detainees who had been convicted of militant activities such as those discussed above broke out of Bahrain's Jaw prison with the help of attackers outside the jail. In March 2017, security forces arrested a group of persons that authorities claimed were plotting to assassinate senior government officials, asserting that the cell received military training by IRGC-QF. Six Bahraini Shiites were sentenced to death for this alleged plot on December 25, 2017. In late October 2017, 29 Bahrainis were convicted for having links to Iran and conducting espionage in Bahrain. 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.<sup>55</sup> The State Department report on international terrorism for 2016, released in July 2017, stated 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.<sup>56</sup>

### *Kuwait*<sup>57</sup>

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, but it also has tried to mediate a settlement of the Yemen conflict and broker a GCC-Iran rapprochement. Kuwait appears to view Iran as helpful in stabilizing Iraq, a country that occupies a central place in Kuwait's foreign policy because of Iraq's 1990 invasion. Kuwait has extensively engaged Iraq's Shiite leaders despite criticism of their marginalization of Sunni Iraqis. Kuwait also exchanges leadership-level visits with Iran; Kuwait's Amir Sabah al-Ahmad Al Sabah visited Iran in June 2014, meeting with Rouhani and Supreme Leader Khamene'i. Kuwait's Foreign Minister visited Iran in late January 2017 to advance Iran-GCC reconciliation, and Rouhani visited Kuwait (and Oman) in February 2017 as part of that abortive effort.

Kuwait is differentiated from some of the other GCC states by its integration of Shiites into the political process and the economy. About 25% of Kuwaitis are Shiite Muslims, but Shiites have not been restive there and Iran was not able to mobilize Kuwaiti Shiites to end Kuwait's support for the Iraqi war effort in the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). At the same time, on numerous occasions, including in 2016, Kuwaiti courts have convicted Kuwaitis with spying for the IRGC-

<sup>54</sup> Souad Mekhennet and Joby Warrick. "In Bahrain's Militant Cells, U.S. Sees Iran." *Washington Post*, April 2, 2017.

<sup>55</sup> State Department Terrorist Designations of Ahmad Hasan Yusuf and Alsayed Murtadha Majeed Ramadhan Alawi. March 17, 2017.

<sup>56</sup> Gam News, Iran, as reported by Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), March 17, 2016.

<sup>57</sup> For detailed information on Iran-Kuwait relations, see CRS Report RS21513, *Kuwait: Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy*, by Kenneth Katzman.

QF or Iran's intelligence service. Kuwait recalled its Ambassador from Iran in connection with the Saudi-Iran dispute over the Saudi execution of Al Nimr.

### *Oman*<sup>58</sup>

Omani officials assert that engagement with Iran is a more effective means to moderate Iran's foreign policy than to isolate or threaten Iran, and Oman has the most consistent and extensive engagement with Iran's leadership. Omani leaders express 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.<sup>59</sup> In March 2014, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani visited Oman, and he visited again in February 2017 along with Kuwait (see above). Sultan Qaboos visited Iran in August 2013, reportedly to explore with the newly elected Rouhani concepts for improved U.S.-Iran relations and nuclear negotiations that ultimately led to the JCPOA. His earlier August 2009 visit there was controversial because it coincided with large protests against alleged fraud in the reelection of then-President Mahmud Ahmadinejad. Since sanctions on Iran were lifted, Iran and Oman have accelerated their joint development of the Omani port of Duqm, which Iran envisions as a trading and transportation outlet for Iran. Since late 2016, Oman also has been a repository of Iranian heavy water, the export of which is needed for Iran to comply with the JCPOA.

Oman has not supported any factions fighting the Assad 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. Oman has denied that Iran has used its territory to smuggle weaponry to the Houthi rebels in Yemen that Iran is supporting. Oman was the only GCC country to not downgrade its relations with Iran in connection with the January 2016 Nimr dispute. And, Oman drew closer to Iran in 2017 because of the intra-GCC rift, which Omani leaders reportedly perceived as a precipitous and misguided action by Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

### *U.S.-Gulf Cooperation against Iran*

The Gulf countries have been considered lynchpins in U.S. strategy over successive U.S. administrations to contain Iranian power, not only in the Gulf but in the region more broadly. The JCPOA caused 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 statement following the 2015 summit at Camp David said:

In the event of [ ] aggression or the threat of [ ] aggression [against the GCC states], the United States stands ready to work with our GCC partners to determine urgently what action may be appropriate, using the means at our collective disposal, including the potential use of military force, for the defense of our GCC partners.<sup>60</sup>

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

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<sup>58</sup> For detailed information on Iran-Oman relations, see CRS Report RS21534, *Oman: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy*, by Kenneth Katzman.

<sup>59</sup> As reported in author conversations in Oman and with Omani officials, 1988-2015.

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/05/14/us-gulf-cooperation-council-camp-david-joint-statement>.

ballistic missile defense capability, which the United States has sought to promote in recent years.<sup>61</sup> Perhaps indicating reassurance, the GCC states expressed support for the JCPOA.<sup>62</sup> The Obama Administration sought to add structure to the U.S.-GCC strategic partnership by instituting a “U.S.-GCC Strategic Dialogue” in March 2012. Earlier, in February 2010, then-Secretary Clinton also raised the issue of a possible U.S. extension of a “security umbrella” or guarantee to regional states against Iran.<sup>63</sup> However, no such formal U.S. security pledge was issued.

The Trump Administration’s characterization of Iran as a major regional threat that must be countered extensively has eased GCC concerns about U.S. policy toward Iran. The GCC states have expressed support for the Trump Administration’s relaxation of restrictions on arms sales to the GCC states and apparent inclination to prioritize defense ties to the GCC states over concerns over GCC human rights practices or other issues. No Gulf state advocates that the United States withdraw from the JCPOA, asserting that it is an established feature whose termination would promote additional regional instability. On March 19, 2018, a day before the Prince Mohammad meeting with President Trump, a U.S. official announced that a new U.S.-Saudi-UAE committee is being formed to coordinate countering Iran’s regional activities.

### ***U.S. Military Presence and Security Partnerships in the Gulf***

Iran has sometimes challenged U.S. forces in the Gulf, perhaps in part to demonstrate that it is not intimidated by U.S. power. Iranian naval elements have become more active in patrolling or undertaking provocative action in the Persian Gulf since early 2016. IRGC-Navy elements have fired rockets near a U.S. aircraft carrier and have conducted numerous “high speed intercepts” of U.S. naval vessels in the Gulf since Implementation Day, including during the Trump Administration. During some of these incidents, U.S. vessels have fired warning shots at approaching Iranian naval craft. DNI Coats testified on May 11, 2017, that about 10% of U.S. Navy interactions with the IRGC-Navy are “unsafe, abnormal, or unprofessional.” However, U.S. Navy and other military commanders say that, since August 2017, Iran has largely ceased the naval challenges. The shift in Iranian behavior might have been prompted by concerns that that the Trump Administration might authorize the use of deadly force in future such incidents.

*U.S. Forces in the Gulf and Defense Agreements.* The GCC states are pivotal to U.S. efforts to counter Iran militarily. There are about 35,000 U.S. forces in the Gulf region currently, most of which are stationed at military facilities in the GCC states that the United States accesses under 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. U.S. defense agreements with the GCC states also reportedly provide for the United States to preposition 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.<sup>64</sup> Some U.S. forces in the Gulf are aboard a U.S. aircraft carrier task force that is in the

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<sup>61</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/05/14/annex-us-gulf-cooperation-council-camp-david-joint-statement>.

<sup>62</sup> 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>.

<sup>63</sup> Paul Richter and Alexandra Davis. “U.S. Promises to Beef up Defense Aid to Persian Gulf Allies.” *Los Angeles Times*, April 7, 2015.

<sup>64</sup> 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/> (continued...)

Gulf region nearly constantly. The Defense Department also uses authority in Section 2282 of U.S.C. Title 10 to program Counterterrorism Partnerships Funds (CTPF) for U.S. special operations forces training to enhance GCC counterterrorism capabilities.

*Arms Sales.* U.S. arms sales to the GCC countries have improved GCC air and naval capabilities and their interoperability with U.S. forces. With the exception of post-2011 uprising Bahrain, 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. Congress has generally not sought to block such sales, although a Senate vote in June 2017 nearly blocked a sale of precision-guided munitions to Saudi Arabia over its tactics in its war effort in Yemen. And, the intra-GCC rift has slowed the process of concluding new arms sales to the GCC states: Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Bob Corker has said he would withhold informal concurrence on major new arms sales to the GCC states until the rift is resolved.

The following sections discuss specific U.S.-Gulf defense relationships.<sup>65</sup>

- *Saudi Arabia.* The United States and Saudi Arabia have utilized memoranda of understanding, limited in scope, to enable a few hundred U.S. military personnel to train the military, National Guard (SANG), and Ministry of Interior forces in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi force has about 225,000 active duty personnel, with about 600 tanks, of which 200 are U.S.-made M1A2 “Abrams” tanks. The Saudi Air Force flies the F-15.
- *Kuwait.* The United States has had a DCA with Kuwait since 1991, and over 13,000 mostly U.S. Army personnel are stationed there, including ground combat troops. Kuwait hosts 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 prepositions 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. The Trump Administration stated during the September 2017 visit to Washington, DC, of Kuwait’s Amir that it would proceed with selling 32 additional F/A-18s.
- *Qatar.* The United States has had a DCA with Qatar since 1992, which was revised in December 2013. Nearly 10,000 U.S. military personnel, mostly Air Force, are in Qatar, manning 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 prepositioning site where U.S. tanks are prepositioned. Qatar’s armed force is

(...continued)

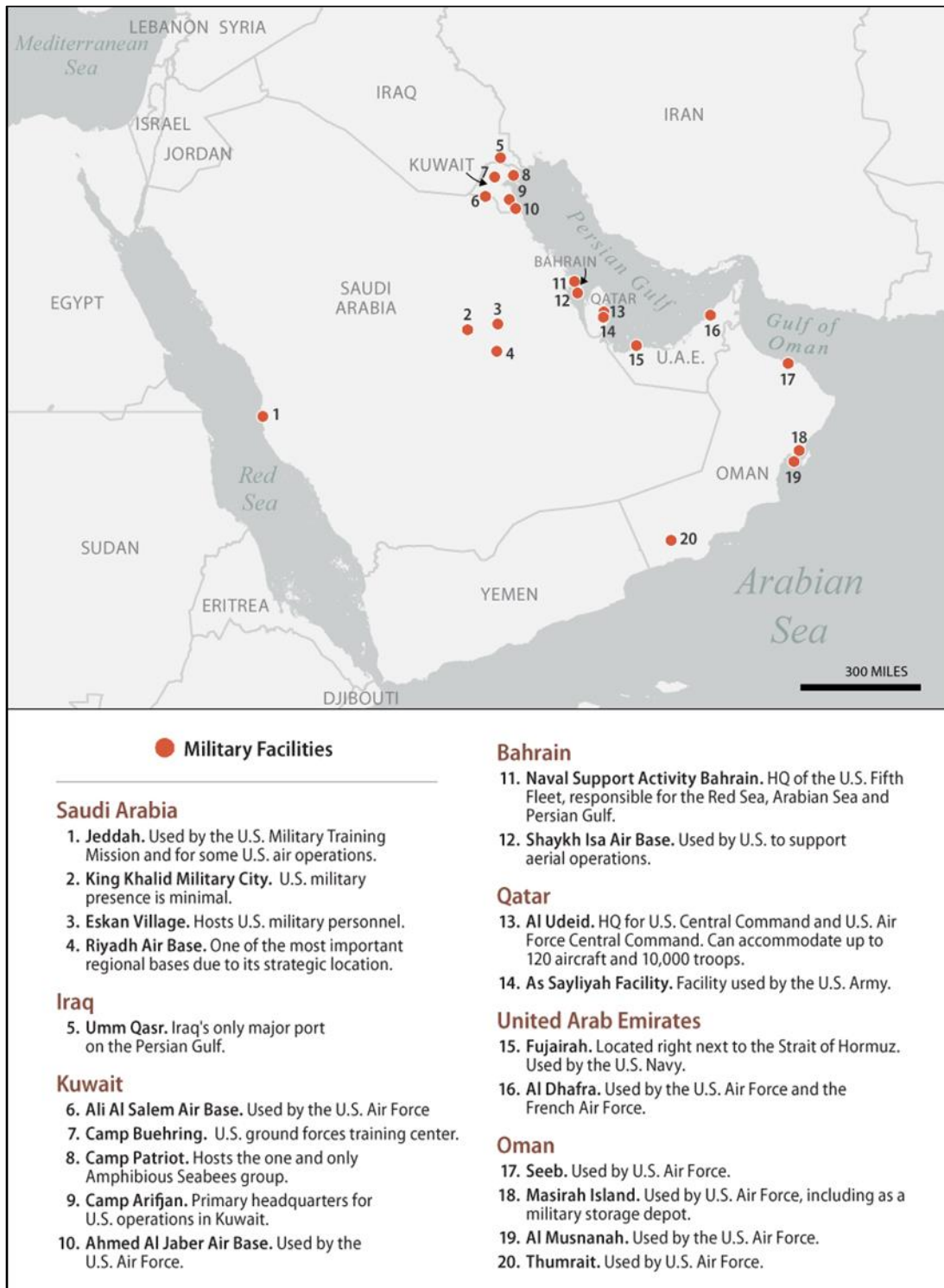
pub185.pdf. Section 1234 of the FY2016 NDAA (P.L. 114-92) required a report within 120 days of enactment (by March 30, 2016) on any U.S. security commitments to Middle Eastern countries, including the GCC, and the U.S. force posture required for those commitments.

<sup>65</sup> The U.S. deployments in the Gulf are discussed in greater detail in CRS reports on the individual GCC states. Information in this section is derived from author visits to the GCC states since 1993 and conversations with U.S. and Gulf state diplomats. See also International Institute for Strategic Studies, “The Military Balance, 2015.”

- small with about 12,000 active military personnel. Qatar has historically relied on French military equipment, including Mirage combat aircraft, but in late 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.
- *UAE.* The United States has had a DCA with UAE since 1994. About 5,000 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 which dock at the large commercial port of Jebel Ali. The UAE armed forces include about 63,000 active duty personnel. Its ground forces use primarily French-made tanks purchased in the 1990s, but its air forces are equipped with F-16s the country has bought from the United States in recent years. The UAE has stated that it wants to buy the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, 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 Trump Administration said in early 2018 that it is considering providing the UAE with advanced briefings on the aircraft, suggesting possible inclination toward such a sale to the UAE. The UAE is the only GCC state to date that has taken delivery of the THAAD anti-missile system.
  - *Bahrain.* The United States has had a DCA with Bahrain since 1991. More than 8,000 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 under the Ministry of Interior. 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. The Obama Administration told Congress in late 2016 that it would not finalize approval of a Bahrain request to purchase additional F-16s unless the government demonstrates progress on human rights issues. In late March 2017, the Trump Administration dropped that condition and is proceeding with the sale, but maintains a general ban on sales of arms to the country's internal security forces.
  - *Oman.* The United States has had a "facilities access agreement" with Oman since April 1980, under which a few hundred 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.
  - *Assistance Issues.* The GCC states are considered wealthy states and most receive little or virtually no U.S. assistance. The least wealthy Gulf states Bahrain and Oman receive a few million dollars per year in Foreign Military Financing (FMF) and International Military Education and Training Funds (IMET). Small amounts of State Department funds are provided to all the Gulf states for counterterrorism/border security programs (nonproliferation, anti-terrorism, de-mining and related, NADR, funds)



Figure 2. Major Persian Gulf Military Facilities



Source: <http://www.darkgovernment.com/news/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/persian-gulf.jpg>.

**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
<b>ARMY and NATIONAL GUARD</b>						
Personnel	6,000	11,000	25,000	8,500	175,000	44,400
Main Battle Tanks	180	293	154	39	600	467
AIFV/APC	225	789	206	230	3,011	1,957
Artillery	151	218	233	91+	771	579+
Attack Helicopters	—	—	—	—	15	—
SAMs	91	136+	48	75	1,805	N/A
<b>NAVY</b>						
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	—
<b>AIR FORCE</b>						
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
<b>MISSILE DEFENSE</b>						
Patriot PAC-2	Yes	Yes	—	Yes	Yes	Yes
Patriot PAC-3	Yes	Yes	—	Yes	Yes	Yes
THAAD	—	—	Considering	Considering	Sale approved by Dept. of State (10/17)	Delivered

**Sources:** *The Military Balance*, 2017, published by the International Institute for Strategic Studies, and various press; <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-saudi-missiles/u-s-approves-possible-15-billion-sale-of-thaad-missiles-to-saudi-arabia-idUSKBN1CB2IN>

**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<sup>66</sup>

Iran's policy has been to support the Shiite-led governments in Iraq and Syria against armed insurgencies or other domestic strife that might threaten those governments. That policy faced a significant challenge from the Islamic State organization, a Sunni radical Islamist movement that used internal dissension to capture significant territory in both of those countries, but which has been beaten back substantially by a U.S.-led coalition as well as Iran-supported government and militia forces in both countries. In part because of its efforts against the Islamic State, in June 2017, Iranian Kurds loyal to the Islamic State attacked Iran's parliament building and the tomb of Ayatollah Khomeini in Tehran—the first known Islamic State attack inside Iran. However, Iran has taken advantage of the Islamic State's defeats to improve Iran's regional strategic position.

### Iraq<sup>67</sup>

In Iraq, the U.S. military ousting of Saddam Hussein in 2003 removed a long-time antagonist and produced governments led by Shiite Islamists with long-standing ties to Iran.<sup>68</sup> The June 2014 offensive led by the Islamic State organization at one point brought Islamic State forces to within 50 miles of the Iranian border. Iran responded by supplying the Baghdad government as well as the *peshmerga* forces of the autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) with IRGC-QF advisers, intelligence drone surveillance, weapons shipments, and other direct military assistance.<sup>69</sup> And, Iranian leaders reportedly acquiesced to U.S. insistence that Iran's longtime ally Maliki be replaced by a different Shiite Islamist, Haider al-Abadi, who pledged to be more inclusive of Sunni leaders.<sup>70</sup> Iran, as does the United States, supports the integrity of Iraq and opposed the September 25, 2017, KRG referendum on independence. Iran appears to support Abadi's continuation in office that is the widely expected result from May 2018 elections.

On the other hand, Iranian involvement in Iraq might complicate the longer-term effort to stabilize Iraq. Iran arms, trains, and advises several Shiite militias. Some of the militias fought the United States during 2003-2011, including with Iran-supplied upgraded rocket-propelled munitions, such as Improvised Rocket Assisted Munitions (IRAMs), and killed about 500 U.S. military personnel during those years.<sup>71</sup> The Iran-backed militias are advised by the IRGC-QF commander, Major General Qasem Soleimani. Iran has typically appointed members of or associates of the IRGC-QF as its Ambassador to Iraq. Since the U.S. intervention in Iraq in 2003, Iran has tended to appoint IRGC-QF commanders as ambassador to Baghdad. Current estimates of the total Shiite militiamen in Iraq number about 110,000-120,000, of which about two-thirds are members of Iran-backed militias.<sup>72</sup> Collectively, all of the Shiite militias are known as Popular Mobilization Forces or Units (PMFs or PMUs). In addition to receiving Iraqi government funds, the PMFs reportedly receive funds from Iran and from various parastatal organizations in Iran.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>66</sup> For information, see CRS Report R43612, *The Islamic State and U.S. Policy*, by Christopher M. Blanchard and Carla E. Humud.

<sup>67</sup> For more information, see CRS Report RS21968, *Iraq: Politics and Governance*, by Kenneth Katzman and Carla E. Humud.

<sup>68</sup> Michael Gordon, "Iran Supplying Syrian Military Via Iraqi Airspace," *New York Times*, September 5, 2012.

<sup>69</sup> "Iran News Agency Reports Death of Iranian Pilot in Iraq." Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. July 5, 2014.

<sup>70</sup> Babak Dehghanpisheh. "Iran Dramatically Shifts Iraq Policy to Confront Islamic State." *Reuters*, September 2, 2014.

<sup>71</sup> <http://www.militarytimes.com/story/military/capitol-hill/2015/07/14/iran-linked-to-deaths-of-500-us-troops-in-iraq-afghanistan/30131097/>.

<sup>72</sup> <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2016/08/16/us-officials-up-to-100000-iran-backed-fighters-now-in-iraq.html>.

<sup>73</sup> Ned Parker. "Power Failure in Iraq as Militias Outgun State." *Reuters*, October 21, 2015.

The commanders of the most powerful Iran-backed militias, including Asa'ib Ahl Al Haq (AAH) leader Qais Khazali, the Badr Organization's Hadi al-Amiri, and Kata'ib Hezbollah's Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, are said to wield significant political influence. They have close ties to Iran dating from their underground struggle against Saddam Hussein in the 1980s and 1990s, and the commanders have publicly pressured Abadi to reduce his reliance on the United States and ally more closely with Iran. Some of these commanders are advocating a complete U.S. withdrawal from Iraq now that the Islamic State has been mostly defeated in Iraq. Some of the Iran-backed militias are competing in the 2018 elections in Iraq as coalition partners, suggesting that Abadi's efforts to compel the militias to meld into the political process might be bearing fruit.

### *Sadrists Militias and Their Offshoots*

Several of the Iran-backed militias are offshoots of the "Mahdi Army" militia that the junior Shiite cleric Moqtada Al Sadr formed in 2004 to combat the U.S. military presence in Iraq. As the U.S. intervention in Iraq ended in 2011, the Mahdi Army evolved into a social services network but, in response to the Islamic State offensive in 2014, it reorganized as the "Salaam (Peace) Brigade," with about 15,000 fighters. One Mahdi Army offshoot, Kata'ib Hezbollah (KAH) was designated by the State Department as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) in June 2009. KAH has an estimated 20,000 fighters.<sup>74</sup> In July 2009, the Department of the Treasury designated it and its commander, Muhandis, as threats to Iraqi stability under Executive Order 13438. Muhandis 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 for the 1983 Da'wa bombings of the U.S. and French embassies there. After these attacks, he served as leader of the Badr Corps of the IRGC-backed Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (later renamed the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, ISCI), but he broke with the group in 2003 because of its support for the U.S. invasion of Iraq. He joined the Mahdi Army during 2003-2006 but then broke to form KAH.

AAH leader Qais al-Khazali headed the Mahdi Army "Special Groups" breakaway faction during 2006-2007, until his capture and incarceration 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 converting it into a political movement and social service network. AAH resumed military activities after the 2014 Islamic State offensive, and has about 15,000 fighters.

### *The Badr Organization*

One major Shiite militia is neither a Sadrists offshoot nor an antagonist of U.S. forces during 2003-2011. The Badr Organization was the armed wing of ISCI, the mainstream Shiite party headed now by Ammar al-Hakim. The Badr Corps, the name of the organization's underground military wing during Saddam's rule, received training and support from the IRGC-QF in its failed efforts to overthrow Saddam during the 1980s and 1990s. The Badr Organization largely disarmed after Saddam's fall and integrated into the political process, supporting the U.S. military presence as a facilitator of Iraq's transition to Shiite rule. Its leader is Hadi al-Amiri, an elected member of the National Assembly who advocates for government reliance on the Shiite militias. In addition, the militia exerts influence in the Interior Ministry, which is led by a Badr member, Mohammad Ghabban. Badr has an estimated 20,000 militia fighters.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2016/02/iraq-popular-demobilisation-160224050939178.html>.

<sup>75</sup> <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2016/02/iraq-popular-demobilisation-160224050939178.html>.

### ***Iran-Backed Militias Formed after the 2011 U.S. Withdrawal***

Some reputedly Iran-backed Shiite militias formed after the U.S. withdrawal. One such militia formed in 2013 to assist the Assad regime—the Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba or “Nujaba Movement,” led by Shaykh Akram al-Ka’bi. In Syria, the group increased its presence on the Aleppo front in 2016 to help the Assad regime recapture the whole 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.” Another Shiite militia, the “Mukhtar Army,” formed in 2013 to help the government suppress Sunni protests. It was led by Wathiq al-Battat, who reportedly was killed in late 2014.<sup>76</sup> The Mukhtar Army claimed responsibility for a late October 2015 attack on Iranian dissidents inhabiting the “Camp Liberty” facility, discussed below. These militias might total 10,000 personnel.

### ***U.S. Policy to Curb Iranian Influence in Iraq***

As discussed above, U.S. policy has been to try to counterbalance Iranian influence in Iraq by working with Iraqi leaders who are well-disposed to the United States and relatively non-sectarian. U.S. officials initially refused to support Iraqi Shiite militias in the anti-Islamic State effort, but U.S. policy since mid-2015 has been to support those PMFs that are not designated as Iran-backed. In October 2017, then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson called on Iran-backed militias to disarm and for their Iranian advisors to “go home.”<sup>77</sup> Although Abadi’s office publicly rebuked that U.S. call, the Trump Administration reportedly is working with Abadi to integrate the militias into the official security forces or demobilize and merge into the political process. The United States apparently supports Abadi’s re-election bid in Iraq as contributing to efforts to counter Iran’s influence there.

### **Syria<sup>78</sup>**

Iranian leaders characterize Syrian President Bashar al Assad as a key ally, despite Assad’s secular ideology, and Iran has sustained a major effort to keep him in power. Several reasons for Iran’s consistent and extensive support for Assad are widely cited, including (1) Syria’s cooperation is key to Iran’s arming and protection of Hezbollah; (2) the Assad regime has been Iran’s closest Arab ally in a region where most governments oppose Iran; and (3) Iranian leaders likely calculate that a Sunni opposition government hostile to Iran would come to power if Assad fell. Iran’s intervention in Syria also has sought to ensure that Sunni extremist groups cannot easily attack Hezbollah in Lebanon from across the Syria border.

Iranian political and IRGC leaders have been open about Iran’s intervention in Syria, and Iranian support to Assad against the rebellion is extensive. U.S. officials and reports assert that Iran continues to provide substantial funds, weapons, and IRGC-QF advisors to the Syrian regime. After 2012, Iran gradually escalated its intervention to the point where regional security sources estimated that, by late 2015, Iran was deploying 1,300-1,800 military personnel in Syria, including IRGC-QF, IRGC ground force, and even some regular army special forces personnel.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>76</sup> [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/12/leader\\_of\\_iran-suppo.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/12/leader_of_iran-suppo.php).

<sup>77</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-gulf-tillerson-iraq/go-home-tillerson-tells-iranian-backed-militias-in-iraq-idUSKBN1CR0JR>

<sup>78</sup> For more information on the conflicts in Syria, see CRS Report RL33487, *Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response*, coordinated by Carla E. Humud.

<sup>79</sup> 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 (continued...))

The deployment of Iranian regular army forces in Syria was significant because Iran's regular military has historically not deployed beyond Iran's borders since the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War. The IRGC-QF recruited over 50,000 Shiite fighters to operating under Iranian command in Syria,<sup>80</sup> including about 7,000 Hezbollah militiamen. Other Shiite militias recruited by Iran include Iraqi militias such as Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, and brigades composed of Afghan and Pakistani Shiites. These militias have advanced east to the point where they can help Iran form a secure supply corridor from Iran to the Lebanon, although, on January 9, 2018, Defense Secretary James Mattis said that "I don't think there's a land bridge right now." On several occasions, Iran-backed forces approached U.S. training locations for Syrian forces in southeast Syria combatting the Islamic State and were subjected to U.S.-led fire to halt their advances. Russian contract forces might have been involved in some of these engagements as well.

Iran's extensive involvement in Syria has alarmed Israeli leaders who now see Iran-backed forces not only on the border with Lebanon but with Syria as well. Iran and Syria have historically used Hezbollah as leverage against Israel to try to achieve regional and territorial aims. Israel accuses Iran of constructing bases in Syria, including rocket and missile factories that can safely supply Hezbollah. Iran tested Israel's capabilities in February 2018 by launching a drone over Israeli territory, which Israel shot down but which precipitated an Israel-Syria clash that resulted in the downing of one Israeli combat aircraft. The clash sparked widespread concerns that tensions between Israel and Iran in Syria could erupt into a broader war between them. Israel reportedly is seeking to influence U.S.-Russia discussions regarding political-military outcomes in Syria to push Iran-backed forces far from Israeli-controlled territory in the border area.<sup>81</sup>

Iran has not hidden its losses in Syria. Deaths of high-ranking IRGC commanders in battles in Syria have been widely publicized in state-run media. Their deaths have been portrayed by the regime as heroic sacrifices on behalf of the Iranian revolution and Iran's national interests. At least 1,000 Iranian military personnel have died in Syria, including several high-level IRGC-QF commanders.<sup>82</sup>

### *Financial Support*

As noted above, estimates of Iran's spending to support Asad's effort against the rebellion vary, and it is possible that no single estimate is reliable. Much of Iran's aid is provided as in-kind supplies such as military equipment, fuel, and ammunition, which might be difficult to quantify and value. In June 2015, the office of the U.N. Special Envoy to Syria Staffan de Mistura, estimated Iran's aid to Syria, including military and economic aid, to total about \$6 billion per year.<sup>83</sup> Illustrative of the range of estimates, an Iranian opposition group asserted, in a 2016 publication, that "over the past 5 years, the Tehran regime has budgeted about 100 billion dollars for the war most of it sent to Syria under cover from [Supreme Leader Ali] Khamenei's office to expedite its dispatch."<sup>84</sup> That estimate suggests that Iran is spending \$20 billion per year to assist

(...continued)

summary).

<sup>80</sup> 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.

<sup>81</sup> Amos Yadlin. "How to Understand Israel's Strike on Syria." *New York Times*, September 9, 2017.

<sup>82</sup> "Death Toll among Iran's forces in Syrian war passes 1,000." *Reuters*, November 22, 2016.

<sup>83</sup> Eli Lake. "Iran Spends Billions to Prop Up Asad," *Bloomberg View*, June 9, 2015.

<sup>84</sup> "How Iran Fuels Syria War." National Council of Resistance of Iran, U.S. Representative Office, 2016. The National Council of Resistance of Iran is an umbrella group dominated by an Iranian opposition organization called the Mojahedin-e-Khalq Organization (MEK).

Asad—a figure approximating Iran’s entire defense budget for one calendar year and which, in that context, may seem inordinately high.

Iranian aid to Syria is difficult to gauge with precision, in part because it includes a combination of economic aid (for which some figures, such as lines of credit, are publicly available in official statements), subsidized oil and commodity transfers, as well as military aid (for which numbers are difficult to obtain). Iran has extended about \$6.6 billion in credits to the Asad government since 2013.<sup>85</sup> Syria reportedly has used the lines of credit to finance Iranian imports including crude oil, foodstuffs such as wheat and canned goods, and agricultural and industrial inputs. In early 2017, Syria also permitted significant new Iranian investments in its telecom, agriculture, and mining sectors.<sup>86</sup>

Prior to the Russian intervention, when Asad’s position appeared less secure, Iran participated in multilateral diplomacy on a political solution in Syria and put forward proposals for a peaceful transition in Syria. In 2015, Iran attended meetings of and did not publicly dissent from joint statements issued by, an 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 on the grounds that, in the wake of the July 2015 Iran nuclear agreement, Iran could potentially contribute to a Syria solution. However, Russia’s intervention in Syria created the potential for Iran to achieve its maximum goals in Syria, and in 2016–2017, Iran has apparently continued to pursue those goals in negotiations brokered by Russia and Turkey. In the event that there is a political transition, Iran will presumably seek to establish a government that would allow it to continue to use Syria to supply Hezbollah.

### ***U.S. Policy to Limit Iranian Influence in Syria***

U.S. officials are attempting to reduce Iranian influence in Syria, although without becoming extensively involved in Syria’s ongoing civil conflict. Then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson devoted much of his January 17, 2018, speech on U.S. policy toward Syria to explaining that the United States would maintain, for an unspecified time, 2,000 U.S. troops in Syria in part for the purpose of diminishing Iranian influence in Syria and denying Iran’s “dreams of a northern arch” (from Iran to the Mediterranean).<sup>87</sup> The Secretary explained that, the U.S.-Russia deescalation agreement for southwest Syria “... addresses Israel’s security by requiring Iranian-backed militias, most notably Hizballah, to move away from Israel’s border.” However, testimony by other U.S. officials, including CENTCOM Commander Gen. Joseph Votel in March 2018 indicated that the U.S. mission in Syria is to prevent the resurgence of the Islamic State rather than to counter Iran.

### **Iran’s Policy toward Israel: Supporting Hamas and Hezbollah<sup>88</sup>**

Iran’s regime asserts that Israel is an illegitimate creation of the West and an oppressor of the Palestinians—a position that differs from that of the Shah of Iran, whose government maintained relatively normal relations with Israel. Supreme Leader Khamene’i has repeatedly described

<sup>85</sup> “Iran Grants USD 1 Billion to Damascus.” *Syria Report*, January 24, 2017; “Factsheet: Syria-Iran Economic Relations since 2013,” *Syria Report*, July 13, 2015.

<sup>86</sup> “Revolutionary Guards Get Hold of Syrian Mobile Phone Licence as Part of Broader Tehran Grab on Economic Assets.” *Syria Report*, January 17, 2017.

<sup>87</sup> Department of State. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. Remarks on the Way Forward for the United States Regarding Syria. January 17, 2018.

<sup>88</sup> 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.

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.<sup>89</sup> These statements underpin Israeli assertions that a nuclear-armed Iran would be an “existential threat” to Israel.

Iran materially supports groups 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. Iran's leaders routinely state that Israel presents a serious strategic threat to Iran and that the international community applies a “double standard” to Iran—Israel has faced no sanctions even though it 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 regularly cite Israeli statements that Israel retains the option to unilaterally strike Iran's nuclear facilities, and 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's material support for militant anti-Israel groups has long concerned not only Israel but successive U.S. Administrations. 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,” and, in September 2017 and in March 2018, he reportedly urged President Trump to seek to renegotiate it or to terminate U.S. participation in it. Still, an Israeli military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities appears unlikely as long as Iran continues to comply with the terms of the JCPOA. Israel also counters Hezbollah and Hamas directly, using its own forces and U.S.-supplied military and intelligence technology.

## **Hamas<sup>90</sup>**

U.S. officials assert that Iran gives Hamas funds, weapons, and training. Hamas seized control of the Gaza Strip in 2007 and has since administered that territory. It formally ceded authority over Gaza in June 2014 to a consensus Palestinian Authority (PA) government and turned over further authority to the PA as part of an October 2017 reconciliation agreement. Hamas terrorist attacks within Israel have decreased in number 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. Iran's support to Hamas has been estimated at times to be as high as \$300 million per year (funds and in-kind support, including weapons) during periods of substantial Iran-Hamas collaboration.<sup>91</sup> CRS has no way to corroborate the past or current levels of Iranian funding to Hamas.

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 buses, restaurants, and other civilian targets inside Israel. However, 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

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<sup>89</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/2015/09/10/middleeast/iran-khamenei-israel-will-not-exist-25-years/>.

<sup>90</sup> For more information, see CRS Report RL34074, *The Palestinians: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti.

<sup>91</sup> Robert Tait, “Iran Cuts Hamas Funding Over Syria.” *Telegraph*, May 31, 2013.



efforts by Asad to defeat the rebellion militarily. Iran reduced its support to Hamas in its brief 2014 conflict with Israel as compared to previous Hamas-Israel conflicts in which Iran backed Hamas extensively. Since then, Iran has apparently sought to rebuild 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.<sup>92</sup> Some Hamas leaders have welcomed restoring the group's relations with Iran, which was formalized during a Hamas delegation visit to Tehran in October 2017, perhaps because of financial difficulties the organization has faced since the military leadership in Egypt began closing smuggling tunnels at the Gaza-Sinai border in 2013.

## 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.<sup>93</sup> The State Department report on international terrorism for 2016 states that “the group generally follows the religious guidance of the Iranian Supreme Leader, which [is] [Grand Ayatollah] Ali Khamenei.”<sup>94</sup> 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. The IRGC-QF and its commander, IRGC Major General Qasem Soleimani, have been designated for U.S. sanctions under Executive Order 13224, which freezes U.S.-based property of entities determined to be supporting acts of international terrorism.

Illustrating the degree to which Iranian assistance has helped Hezbollah become a potential global terrorism threat, the State Department report on international terrorism for 2016 added that Hezbollah continues to be “capable of operating around the world”—a formulation also used in the report for 2015. According to the State Department and many other assessments, Iran assisted Hezbollah to perpetrate the 1992 attack on Israel’s embassy in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and a 1994 bombing of the Argentine-Israeli Mutual Association in that same city. There is strong evidence that Hezbollah conducted a July 2012 attack on a passenger bus carrying 42 Israeli tourists in Bulgaria. U.S. reports do not accuse Iran of assisting, but that attack nonetheless appeared to support the objectives of both Iran and Hezbollah in demonstrating they can inflict punishment on Israel’s citizens in a wide range of places.

The State Department report for 2016 adds that Iran provides “the majority of financial support for Hezbollah in Lebanon,” and “has trained thousands of [Hezbollah] fighters at camps in Iran.” The State Department report for 2015 contained a more specific figure, stating that Iran has provided Hezbollah with “hundreds of millions of dollars.”<sup>95</sup> Iranian financial support for the group probably fluctuates: Iran likely has provided high levels of aid to the group since its combat

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<sup>92</sup> 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>.

<sup>93</sup> See Ben Hubbard. “Hezbollah Wields Rising Power as Iran’s Enforcer.” *New York Times*, August 28, 2017.

<sup>94</sup> Department of State. Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism. Country Reports on Terrorism: 2016.

<sup>95</sup> Department of State. Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism. Country Reports on Terrorism: 2015

intervention in Syria and at times such as the 2006 Hezbollah war with Israel, whereas financial support has likely waned when the group is not involved in significant operations.<sup>96</sup>

Similarly, the number of IRGC-QF advisers working with Hezbollah has apparently fluctuated according to the operational level of activity of the group. 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<sup>97</sup> and able to assist IRGC-QF operations elsewhere, such as in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.<sup>98</sup> In Syria, the IRGC-QF has facilitated Hezbollah's extensive involvement on behalf of the Asad regime, whose continuation in power is in the interests of both Iran and Hezbollah. Syria is the key conduit through which the IRGC-QF has historically armed and assisted Hezbollah.

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 Chinese-made 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.<sup>99</sup>

The State Department report on international terrorism for 2016 says that, according to the Israeli government, since that conflict, Hezbollah has stockpiled more than 130,000 rockets and missiles,<sup>100</sup> 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.<sup>101</sup>

Hezbollah has become a major force in Lebanon's politics, in part due to the arms and funding it gets from Iran. Hezbollah now plays a major role in decisionmaking and leadership selections in Lebanon, including the late 2016 accession of Michel Aoun as President. Hezbollah's militia has become a major political-military force inside the country, rivaling that 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. In early November 2017, the resignation of Prime Minister Sa'd Hariri appeared intended to expose and undermine Hezbollah's influence in Lebanon—a move he undertook immediately after close consultations with Riyadh. Yet, the resignation was rescinded by popular pressure in Lebanon and did diminish Hezbollah's clout in Lebanon.

### ***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. The United States has not acted against Hezbollah militarily, but it has refrained from criticizing the air strikes Israel has carried out inside Syria against suspected shipments of

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<sup>96</sup> Author conversations with various experts and U.S. officials in Washington, DC, 1985-2017.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ben Hubbard. *New York Times*, op.cit.

<sup>99</sup> "Nasrallah Wins the War." *The Economist*, August 17, 2006.

<sup>100</sup> State Department terrorism report for 2016, op.cit.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

Iranian weapons to Hezbollah. In January 2015, apparently in response to one of these air strikes, Hezbollah attacked an Israeli military convoy near the Lebanon-Israel-Syria tri-border area, killing two Israeli soldiers, but the incident did not result in an escalation. Israel reportedly is concerned that Hezbollah's buildup in Syria gives that group an additional vantage point to potentially attack Israel, and Israeli and U.S. officials have been working with Russian officials to try to persuade them to limit Hezbollah and Iran's presence in Syria. The United States has imposed sanctions on Iranian entities involved in supplying Hezbollah as well as on Hezbollah and its related entities. Congress is considering additional legislation, including H.R. 3329 and S. 1595, what would seek to sever Hezbollah's access to the global financial system, although the effect of such sanctions might be minimal insofar as major international banks already shun Hezbollah.

## Yemen<sup>102</sup>

Iranian leaders have not generally identified Yemen as a core Iranian security interest, but Iranian leaders appear to perceive Yemen's instability as an opportunity to acquire additional leverage against Saudi Arabia and U.S. interests. Yemen has been unstable since the 2011 "Arab Spring" uprisings, which, in Yemen, forced longtime President Ali Abdullah Saleh to resign in January 2012. Iran reportedly assisted the Zaydi Shiite revivalist movement known as the "Houthis" (Ansar Allah) in its seizure of the capital, Sana'a, that forced Saleh's successor, Abd Rabu Mansur Al Hadi, to flee. In March 2015, Saudi Arabia assembled an Arab coalition that, with some logistical help from U.S. forces, has helped recapture some territory lost to the Houthis.<sup>103</sup>

Many observers assess that Iran's influence over the Houthis is limited, that the Houthi insurrection action was not instigated by Iran, and that Iran's support for the Houthis has been modest. On February 1, 2017, a National Security Council official gave an assessment of Iran-Houthi relations that was similar to that asserted by the Obama Administration—that Iran "equips and advises" and is a "key supporter" of the Houthis but does not assess Iran as "having control" over the Houthis.<sup>104</sup> Some Houthi sources estimate Iran has supplied the group with "tens of millions of dollars" total over the past few years.<sup>105</sup> However, 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 Arabian Peninsula. Iranian weapons shipments to the Houthis are banned by Resolution 2231 on Iran and also by Resolution 2216 on Yemen, discussed above.

A July 2016 report on Iran by the U.N. Secretary-General reiterated the assertion<sup>106</sup> made previously by U.N. experts, that Iran has shipped arms to the Houthis. Among the systems Iran is providing are anti-ship cruise missiles that are of increasing concern to U.S. commanders. The Houthis fired anti-ship missiles at UAE and U.S. ships in the Red Sea in October 2016, and 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

<sup>102</sup> For more information, see CRS Report R43960, *Yemen: Civil War and Regional Intervention*, by Jeremy M. Sharp.

<sup>103</sup> Ali al-Mujahed and Hugh Naylor. "Yemen Rebels Defy Saudi-led Attacks." *Washington Post*, March 28, 2015.

<sup>104</sup> Ali Watkins, Ryan Grim, and Akbar Shahid Ahmed, "Iran Warned Houthis Against Yemen Takeover," *Huffington Post*, April 20, 2015; transcript of NSC briefing for journalists, February 1, 2017.

<sup>105</sup> Jay Solomon, Dion Nissenbaum, and As Fitch, "In Strategic Shift, U.S. Draws Closer to Yemeni Rebels." *Wall Street Journal*, January 29, 2015.

<sup>106</sup> Report of the Secretary-General on the Implementation of Security Council Resolution 2231 (2015). U.N. Document Number S/2016/589, July 12, 2016.

2017, the Houthis damaged a Saudi ship in the Red Sea—an action that contributed to the February 1, 2017, Trump Administration statement putting Iran “on notice” for its regional malign activities. The degree of U.S. concern about Iran’s supplies of missiles to the Houthis was reflected in U.S. Centcom commander General Joseph Votel’s March 29, 2017, testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, referring to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait:

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.

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. The December 8, 2017, report by the U.N. Secretary General on implementation of Resolution 2231 provided some indications to support those allegations as well as allegations that Iran had shipped other weapons to the Houthis, but the report was not definitive in its conclusions.<sup>107</sup> Nonetheless, U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Nikki Haley cited that report in a December 14, 2017, presentation to the Security Council that asserted definitively that Iran had given the Houthis the missiles fired on Riyadh.<sup>108</sup> A report by a U.N. panel of experts in January 2018 reportedly found that two missiles fired on Saudi Arabia by the Houthis, on July 22 and November 4, 2017, were consistent with the design of Iranian missiles.<sup>109</sup> The report did not say with certainty who supplied the missiles or how they were transported to Yemen. Saudi officials claimed both missiles were intercepted. In late February 2018, Russia blocked a U.N. Security Council resolution from identifying Iran directly as a violator of the U.N. ban on weapons shipments to Yemen (Resolution 2216). Iran has denied providing the Houthis with missiles and assert that they are from an arsenal possessed by the government of Yemen before the civil strife began in 2011.

### ***U.S. Policy to Counter Iranian Influence in Yemen***

The United States has sought to prevent Iran from delivering weapons to the Houthis. At the U.S.-GCC summit in April 2016, the United States and the GCC agreed to joint patrols to prevent Iranian weapons shipments to the Houthis and have intercepted shipments since. Some reports indicate that, to escape U.S. and U.S.-allied naval scrutiny, Iran is transferring its weapons deliveries to a variety of small boats in the northern Persian Gulf, from where they sail to Yemen.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Fourth Report of the Secretary-General on the Implementation of Security Council Resolution 2231 (2015). S/2017/1030. December 8, 2017.

<sup>108</sup> <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/12/14/nikki-haley-yemen-houthi-rebels-iran-missiles-press-conference-pentagon-skepticism-united-nations-trump-nuclear-deal-diplomacy/>

<sup>109</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/un-probe-details-fallout-of-proxy-war-in-yemen-between-saudi-coalition-and-iran-/2018/01/11/3e3f9302-f644-11e7-9af7-a50bc3300042\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/un-probe-details-fallout-of-proxy-war-in-yemen-between-saudi-coalition-and-iran-/2018/01/11/3e3f9302-f644-11e7-9af7-a50bc3300042_story.html)

<sup>110</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-gulf-kuwait-iran-exclusive-idUSKBN1AH4I4>.

## Turkey<sup>111</sup>

Iran and Turkey, which share a short border, have extensive but varying political and economic 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. Iran and Turkey have disputes on some regional issues, possibly caused by the sectarian differences between Sunni-inhabited Turkey and Shiite Iran. Turkey has advocated Asad's ouster as part of a solution for conflict-torn Syria whereas Iran is a key supporter of Asad. However, following a failed Turkish military coup in July 2016, and mutual concerns over the empowerment of Syrian Kurdish forces, Turkey-Iran differences narrowed. Turkey's President Recep Tayip Erdogan has come to publicly accept that Asad might remain in power in Syria, at least through a period of transition, and both countries are integral part of Russia-led talks on an overall political solution for Syria. 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. 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, Hamid Baqeri, who rose through IRGC ranks, visited Ankara.

Turkey has supported the JCPOA, and sanctions relief on Iran has enabled Iran-Turkey trade to expand. Iran is a major supplier of both oil and natural gas to Turkey, through a joint pipeline that began operations in the late 1990s and has since been supplemented by an additional line.

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 and other Islamist movements.

## Egypt

Iran's relations with Egypt have been strained for decades, spanning various Egyptian regimes. Egypt is a Sunni-dominated state that is aligned politically and strategically with other Sunni governments that are critical of Iran. Iran broke relations with Egypt shortly after the 1979 peace treaty Egypt signed with Israel. The two countries reportedly have been close to reestablishing full relations numerous times, including after the election of a Muslim Brotherhood leader, Mohammad Morsi, as Egypt's president. Morsi visited Iran in August 2012. However, relations worsened again after the military's overthrow of the Morsi government. Egypt, particularly under the government of President Abd al Fattah Sisi, views Hamas as an Islamist threat and has sought to choke off 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.

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<sup>111</sup> For analysis on Turkey's foreign policy and U.S. relations, see CRS Report R44000, *Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations In Brief*, by Jim Zanotti.

## South and Central Asia

Iran's relations with countries in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and South Asia vary significantly, but most countries in these regions conduct relatively normal trade and diplomacy with Iran. Some of them, such as Uzbekistan and Pakistan, 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 Iran is able to exert influence there. Some countries in the region, particularly India, seek greater integration with the United States and other world powers and tend to downplay cooperation with Iran. The following sections cover those countries in the Caucasus and South and Central Asia that have significant economic and political relationships with Iran.

**Figure 3. South and Central Asia Region**



Source: Created by CRS.

### The South Caucasus: Azerbaijan and Armenia

Azerbaijan is, like Iran, mostly Shiite 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. 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. The relationship is expanding among Iran, Armenia, and Georgia now that Iran is not under international economic sanctions. On December 21, 2016, President Rouhani visited Armenia to discuss a Persian Gulf-Black Sea transit and transport corridor.<sup>112</sup>

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,<sup>113</sup> 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. On the other hand, the United States has accepted Azerbaijan's need to deal with Iran on some major regional energy projects. Several U.S. sanctions laws exempted from sanctions long-standing joint natural gas projects that involve some Iranian firms—particularly the Shah Deniz natural gas field and pipeline in the Caspian Sea. The project is run by a consortium in which Iran's Naftiran Intertrade Company (NICO)

<sup>112</sup> <http://www.tehrantimes.com/news/409363/Iran-Armenia-discuss-Persian-Gulf-Black-Sea-corridor>.

<sup>113</sup> <http://foreignpolicynews.org/2014/04/10/azerbaijans-strategic-relations-united-states/>.

holds a passive 10% share. (Other major partners are BP, Azerbaijan's national energy firm SOCAR, and Russia's Lukoil.)<sup>114</sup>

The lifting of sanctions on Iran has caused Azerbaijan to alter its policy toward Iran somewhat. 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. The project is estimated to cost \$400 million. And, some press reports indicate that Iranian investors previously or still linked to Iranian governing institutions have engaged in real estate and other projects in Azerbaijan.

## Central Asia

Iran has generally sought positive relations with the leaderships of the Central Asian states, even though most of these leaderships are secular and all of the Central Asian states are mostly Sunni inhabited. Almost all of the Central Asian states share a common language and culture with Turkey; Tajikistan is alone among them in sharing a language with Iran. Several have active Sunni Islamist opposition movements, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU),<sup>115</sup> giving the Central Asian countries common cause with Iran to prevent Sunni jihadist terrorist actions. The IMU, which is active in Afghanistan, in mid-2015, declared its loyalty to the Islamic State organization.<sup>116</sup>

Iran and the Central Asian states are expanding economic relations, perhaps in part to fit into China's "One Belt, One Road" initiative 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.<sup>117</sup> And, the lifting of sanctions could 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.

Along with India and Pakistan, 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. Apparently in an effort to cooperate with international efforts to pressure Iran, in June 2010, the SCO barred admission to Iran on the grounds that it is under U.N. Security Council sanctions.<sup>118</sup> Some officials from SCO member countries have stated that the the JCPOA removes that formal obstacles to Iran's obtaining full membership, but opposition to Iran's full membership among some SCO countries has denied Iran from full membership, to date.

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<sup>114</sup> For more information, see CRS Report RS20871, *Iran Sanctions*, by Kenneth Katzman.

<sup>115</sup> 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>.

<sup>116</sup> Stratfor. "Re-Examining the Threat of Central Asian Militancy" January 21, 2015. <http://www.stratfor.com/analysis/re-examining-threat-central-asian-militancy#axzz3PTRMU0el>.

<sup>117</sup> <http://www.railwaygazette.com/news/news/asia/single-view/view/iran-turkmenistan-kazakhstan-rail-link-inaugurated.html>.

<sup>118</sup> 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.

## **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. Turkmenistan still exports some natural gas through the Iran-Turkey gas pipeline, but China has since become Turkmenistan's largest natural gas customer. Perhaps in an attempt to diversify gas export routes, President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov signaled in 2007 that Turkmenistan seeks to develop a trans-Caspian gas pipeline, but that project has not been implemented, to date.

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,<sup>119</sup> with completion expected in 2019. U.S. officials have expressed strong support for the project as "a very positive step forward and sort of a key example of what we're seeking with our New Silk Road Initiative, which aims at regional integration to lift all boats and create prosperity across the region."<sup>120</sup>

## **Tajikistan**

Iran and Tajikistan share a common Persian language, as well as literary and cultural ties. Despite the similar ethnicity, the two do not share a border and the population of Tajikistan is mostly Sunni. 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" and that close ties with neighboring states such as Iran would be based on noninterference in each other's internal affairs and the peaceful settlement of disputes, such as over border, water, and energy issues.<sup>121</sup> He indicated intent to expand relations with Iran, but few if any joint projects have materialized.

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 part because the group attacked some civilian targets in Iran, in November 2010, the State Department named the group an FTO.

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<sup>119</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/09/15/turkmenistan-pipeline-idUSL5N11L0RE20150915>.

<sup>120</sup> State Department, Daily Press Briefing, May 23, 2012.

<sup>121</sup> Center for Effective Dispute Resolution (CEDR), March 16, 2013, Doc. No. CEL-54015758.



## **Kazakhstan**

Kazakhstan, one of the seemingly more stable Central Asian states, is a significant power by virtue of its geographic location, large territory, and ample natural resources. It supported Iran nuclear negotiations by hosting a round of P5+1-Iran nuclear negotiations in 2013. In September 2014, Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev held talks with President Rouhani and expressed the hope that a JCPOA would be achieved, enabling Iran to better integrate economically into the Central Asian region.<sup>122</sup> Kazakhstan played a role in the commercial arrangements that produced the late December 2015 shipment out to Russia of almost all of Iran's stockpile of low-enriched uranium, an action that fulfilled a key requirement of the JCPOA. 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.

With sanctions eased, Iran is 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). Two major offshore oil fields in Kazakhstan's sector of the Caspian Sea—Kashagan and Kurmangazy—are estimated to contain at least 14 billion barrels of recoverable 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.<sup>123</sup> The two countries are not at odds over specific sections of the Caspian Sea, but the territorial arrangements of the Caspian are not settled.<sup>124</sup>

## **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) extremist group. In February 1999, six bomb blasts in Tashkent's governmental area nearly killed then President Islam Karimov, who was expected to attend a high-level meeting there. The government alleged that the plot was orchestrated by the IMU with assistance from Afghanistan's Taliban, which was in power in Afghanistan and hosting Osama bin Laden. In September 2000, the State Department designated the IMU as an FTO.<sup>125</sup> 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. He was replaced 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. Most of Uzbekistan's natural gas production is for domestic consumption.

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<sup>122</sup> <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13930618000811>.

<sup>123</sup> <http://en.mehrnews.com/news/109439/Kazakhstan-to-resume-oil-swap-with-Iran>.

<sup>124</sup> <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/79761>.

<sup>125</sup> <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2001/html/10252.htm#imu>.

## 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. This section focuses on several countries in South Asia that have substantial interaction with Iran.

## Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, Iran is pursuing a multi-track strategy by helping develop Afghanistan economically, engaging the central government, supporting pro-Iranian groups and, at times, arming insurgent fighters. An Iranian goal appears to be to restore some of its traditional sway in eastern, 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 Islamic State affiliates in Afghanistan, such as Islamic State—Khorasan Province, ISKP, an affiliate of the Islamic State organization that Iran is trying to thwart on numerous fronts in the region. The two countries are said to be cooperating effectively in their shared struggle against narcotics trafficking; Iranian border forces take consistent heavy losses in operations to try to prevent the entry of narcotics into Iran. President Ghani and Iranian leaders meet periodically, in part to discuss cooperation against Sunni extremist groups.<sup>126</sup>

Iran has sought influence in Afghanistan in part by supporting the Afghan government, which is dominated by Sunni Muslims and ethnic Pashtuns. In October 2010, then-President Hamid Karzai admitted that Iran was providing cash payments (about \$2 million per year) to his government.<sup>127</sup> It is not known whether such payments continue. Iran’s ally, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, who is half-Tajik and speaks Dari, is “Chief Executive Officer” of the Afghan government under a power-sharing arrangement with President Ashraf Ghani that followed the 2014 presidential election.

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, including 107mm rockets, to select Taliban and other militants in Afghanistan, and of training Taliban fighters in small unit tactics, small arms use, explosives, and indirect weapons fire.<sup>128</sup> In July 2012, Iran allowed the Taliban to open an office in Zahedan (eastern Iran).<sup>129</sup> In December 2016, Iran invited several Taliban figures to an “Islamic Unity” conference in Tehran. Reflecting apparent concern about the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, Iran reportedly tried to derail the U.S.-Afghanistan Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA), signed in September 2014, that allowed the United States to maintain troops in Afghanistan after 2014. It prohibits the United States from launching military action against other countries from Afghanistan.

The occasional Iranian support to Taliban factions came despite the fact that Iran saw the Taliban regime in Afghanistan of 1996-2001 as an adversary. The Taliban allegedly committed atrocities against Shiite Afghans (Hazara tribes) while seizing control of Persian-speaking areas of western

<sup>126</sup> “Afghanistan, Iran to Work together Against “Macabre” IS Threat.” RFE/RL, April 22, 2015.

<sup>127</sup> Dexter Filkins. “Iran Is Said to Give Top Karzai Aide Cash by the Bagful.” *New York Times*, October 23, 2010.

<sup>128</sup> State Department, Country Reports on International Terrorism: 2011. <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2011/195547.htm>.

<sup>129</sup> Maria Abi-Habib, “Tehran Builds On Outreach to Taliban,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 1, 2012.

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<sup>130</sup>

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.<sup>131</sup> However, a rift emerged 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 Shiite Muslim minorities who opposed Taliban rule. Iran reportedly is concerned that Pakistan might harbor ambitions of returning the Taliban movement to power in Afghanistan.<sup>132</sup> In addition, two Iranian Sunni Muslim militant groups that attack Iranian regime targets—*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 declined a Saudi request that Pakistan participate in the Saudi-led coalition against the Houthis in Yemen, but Pakistan joined Saudi Arabia's 34-nation "anti-terrorism coalition" in December 2015. The coalition was announced as a response to the Islamic State, but Iran asserts it is directed at reducing Iran's regional influence. In January 2017, the former Chief of Army Staff of Pakistan, Raheel Sharif, was appointed military commander of that coalition—an appointment that clearly signaled further Pakistani tilt toward Saudi Arabia. Experts have speculated that if Saudi Arabia sought to counter Iran's nuclear program with one of its own, the prime source of technology for the Saudi program would be Pakistan.

The two nations' bilateral agenda has increasingly focused on 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.<sup>133</sup> Prior to the JCPOA, U.S. officials stated that the project could be subject to U.S. sanctions under the Iran Sanctions Act,<sup>134</sup> but the applicable provisions of the Act were waived to implement the JCPOA. There is little evident movement on the pipeline as of March 2018.

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<sup>130</sup> 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.

<sup>131</sup> John Lancaster and Kamran Khan, "Pakistanis Say Nuclear Scientists Aided Iran," *Washington Post*, January 24, 2004.

<sup>132</sup> Author conversations with experts in Washington, DC, who consult with Iranian government officials. 2013-15.

<sup>133</sup> <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/china-to-build-pakistan-iran-gas-pipeline-pakistan-government/articleshow/46867932.cms>.

<sup>134</sup> <http://www.thenational.ae/business/energy/big-powers-block-iran-pakistan-gas-pipeline-plans>.

## India<sup>135</sup>

India and Iran have overlapping histories and civilizations, and they are aligned on several strategic issues. Tens of millions of India's citizens are Shiite Muslims. Both countries have historically supported minority factions in Afghanistan that are generally at odds with Afghanistan's dominant Pashtun community that tends to have close ties to Pakistan.

As international sanctions on Iran increased in 2010-2013, India sought to preserve its long-standing ties with Iran while cooperating with the sanctions regime. In 2010, India's central bank ceased using a Tehran-based regional body, the Asian Clearing Union, to handle transactions with Iran. In January 2012, Iran agreed to accept India's local currency, the rupee, to settle nearly half of its sales to India. In subsequent years, India reduced its purchases of Iranian oil at some cost to its own development, receiving from the U.S. Administration exemptions from U.S. sanctions for doing so. However, India has increased oil purchases from Iran to nearly pre-2012 levels now that sanctions have been lifted, and in May 2016 India agreed to transfer to Iran about \$6.5 billion that it owed for Iranian oil shipments but which was held up for payment due to sanctions.

Some projects India has pursued in Iran involve not only economic issues but national strategy. 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 had hesitated to move forward on that project because of U.S. opposition to projects that benefit Iran. India has said that the implementation of JCPOA sanctions relief in January 2016 paved the way for work to begin in earnest on the Chabahar project. India, Iran, and Afghanistan held a ceremony in May 2016 to herald the start of work on the port based on an Indian pledge of a \$500 million investment in it, with Iran to provide the remaining \$500 million. Work was slowed by the difficulty equipment suppliers had in obtaining financing for the project, a consequence of hesitancy among banks about whether the United States might still try to sanction the project.<sup>136</sup> However, on December 3, 2017, Iran inaugurated the \$1 billion expansion of Chabahar. India has begun shipping wheat to Afghanistan through this new port. The progress paved the way for a Rouhani visit to India in mid-February 2018, in which he and India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi signed memoranda outlining future expanded energy cooperation.

As noted above, in 2009, India withdrew from the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline project over concerns about the security of the pipeline, the location at which the gas would be transferred to India, pricing of the gas, and transit tariffs. Long-standing distrust between India and Pakistan also played a role in the withdrawal. During economic talks in July 2010, Iranian and Indian officials reportedly raised the issue of constructing a subsea natural gas pipeline, which would bypass Pakistani territory<sup>137</sup> but be costly to construct.

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.

<sup>135</sup> 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.

<sup>136</sup> <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/transportation/shipping/-/transport/india-slow-to-develop-chabahar-port-as-china-races-ahead-at-rival-hub/articleshow/54693856.cms>; <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-iran-ports-idUSKBN19024M>.

<sup>137</sup> <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/world/iran-backs-deepsea-gas-pipeline-to-india/article5466999.ece>.

## Russia

Iran appears to attach increasing weight to its relations with Russia—a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council, a supplier of arms to Iran, and a key ally supporting the Asad regime. Russia has faced domestic attacks by Sunni Islamist extremist movements, and Russia appears to view Iran as a de facto ally in combating such movements. Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Iran on November 23, 2015, to attend a conference of major international natural gas producers, and also held talks with Supreme Leader Khamene'i and President Rouhani on Syria and other strategic and economic issues. That visit resulted in an announcement of a \$5 billion line of credit to Iran for possible joint projects, including additional natural gas pipelines, railroads, and power plants.<sup>138</sup> Rouhani visited Moscow on March 28, 2017, to discuss with President Putin the issues discussed below. During Putin's visit to Tehran on November 1, 2017, the two countries agreed to collaborate on "strategic energy deals" valued at about \$30 billion.<sup>139</sup>

U.S. officials express concern not necessarily with Iran-Russia economic ties but with their military cooperation, particularly in Syria. Russian intervention has mainly been to keep Asad in power. Russia-Iran cooperation was pivotal to the Asad regime's recapture of rebel-held portions of the northern city of Aleppo in December 2016. At the same time, the two countries' interests do not align precisely in Syria. Iranian leaders express far greater concern about protecting Hezbollah in any post-Asad regime than do leaders of Russia, whose interests appear to center on Russia's overall presence in the Middle East and retention of naval and other bases in Syria. In August 2016, Iran briefly 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 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 Defense Minister Hosein Dehghan 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, 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 lifted its ban on the S-300 sale. Russia has shipped the system, and Iran has begun deploying and testing it. In January 2015, Iran and Russia signed a memorandum of understanding on defense cooperation, including military drills.<sup>140</sup>

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. Russia and Iran reportedly are negotiating for Russia to build at least two additional nuclear power plants in Iran. During his November 2015 visit to Iran, Putin announced a resumption of civilian nuclear cooperation with Iran, potentially including reprocessing enriched uranium. In December 2015, Russia was the end destination of the shipment out of Iran of almost all of Iran's stockpile of low-enriched uranium—helping Iran meet a key requirement of the JCPOA.

<sup>138</sup> "Russian President Putin, Iran's Ayatollah Khamenei Meet to Discuss Syria." *Wall Street Journal*, November 23, 2015.

<sup>139</sup> "Russia and Iran Sign \$30 bn Energy Agreements." *Financial Times*, November 1, 2017.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

## Europe

U.S. and European approaches on Iran converged during 2006-2017 because of shared concerns about Iran's nuclear program. Prior to that time, European countries appeared somewhat less concerned than the United States about Iranian policies and were reluctant to sanction Iran. After the passage of Resolution 1929 in June 2010, European Union (EU) sanctions on Iran became nearly as extensive as those of the United States.<sup>141</sup> In 2012, the EU banned imports of Iranian crude oil and natural gas. The EU has lifted nearly all of its sanctions on Iran and numerous European business and diplomatic delegations have visited Iran since the JCPOA was finalized and are resuming business relationships severed during 2011-2016.<sup>142</sup>

Iran has always maintained full diplomatic relations with the EU countries, although relations have sometimes been disrupted as part of EU country reactions to Iranian assassinations of dissidents in Europe or attacks by Iranian militants on EU country diplomatic property in Iran. There are regular scheduled flights from several European countries to Iran, and many Iranian students attend European universities. Relations were not broken after a Hezbollah attack on Israeli tourists in Bulgaria in 2012 (see **Table 1** above) and the July 2013 EU designation of the military wing of Lebanese Hezbollah as a terrorist organization. After the JCPOA was finalized in July 2015, then-British Foreign Secretary Phillip Hammond visited Iran and reopened Britain's embassy there, closed since the 2011 attack on it by pro-government protesters.

During the 1990s, U.S. and European policies toward Iran were in sharp contrast. 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. The EU-Iran 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, but it resumed in May 1998 during Mohammad Khatemi's presidency of Iran. In the 1990s, European and Japanese creditors bucked U.S. objections and rescheduled about \$16 billion in Iranian debt bilaterally, in spite of Paris Club rules that call for multilateral rescheduling. During 2002-2005, there were active negotiations between the European Union and Iran on a "Trade and Cooperation Agreement" (TCA) that would have lowered the tariffs or increased quotas for Iranian exports to the EU countries.<sup>143</sup> Negotiations were discontinued in late 2005 after Iran abrogated an agreement with several EU countries to suspend uranium enrichment.

Although the U.S. Administration ceased blocking Iran from applying for World Trade Organization (WTO) membership in May 2005, there has been insufficient international support to grant Iran WTO membership. Implementation of the JCPOA might facilitate Iran's entry into that organization, although the accession process is complicated and could allow for existing members to block Iran's entry, using justifications having little to do with purely trade issues.

<sup>141</sup> For information on EU sanctions in place on Iran, see [http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/iran/eu\\_iran/restrictive\\_measures/index\\_en.htm](http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/iran/eu_iran/restrictive_measures/index_en.htm). See also: CRS Insight IN10656, *Iran Policy and the European Union*, by Derek E. Mix and Kenneth Katzman and CRS Insight IN10809, *Doing Business with Iran: EU-Iran Trade and Investment Relations*, by Cathleen D. Cimino-Isaacs and Kenneth Katzman.

<sup>142</sup> For more information on the post-sanctions business relationships between Iran and the EU countries, see CRS Report RS20871, *Iran Sanctions*, by Kenneth Katzman.

<sup>143</sup> During the active period of talks, which began in December 2002, there were working groups focused not only on the TCA terms and proliferation issues but also on Iran's human rights record, Iran's efforts to derail the Middle East peace process, Iranian-sponsored terrorism, counternarcotics, refugees, migration issues, and the Iranian opposition PMOI.

## East Asia

East Asia includes three of Iran's five largest buyers of crude oil and one country, North Korea, that is widely accused of supplying Iran with missile and other military-related technology. The countries in Asia have not extensively intervened militarily or politically in the Middle East, and Iran rarely criticizes countries in Asia.

### China<sup>144</sup>

China, a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council and a P5+1 party to the JCPOA, is Iran's largest oil customer. During U.N. Security Council deliberations on Iran during 2006-2013, China tended to argue for less stringent sanctions than did the United States. China's compliance with U.S. sanctions was pivotal to U.S. efforts to reduce Iran's revenue from oil sales. China is also central to Iran's efforts to rebound economically now that sanctions have been lifted.<sup>145</sup>

China faces a potential threat from Sunni Muslim extremists in western China and appears to see Shiite Iran as a potential ally against Sunni radicals. China also appears to agree with Iran's view that the Assad regime is preferable to the Islamic State and other Islamist rebel organizations.

Shortly after Implementation Day of the JCPOA, China's President Xi Jinping included Tehran on a visit to the Middle East region. His trip to Iran generally focused on China's vision of an energy and transportation corridor extending throughout Eurasia ("One Belt, One Road," OBOR), and including Iran, and 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 OBOR vision. As an example, in February 2016, the first rail cargo from China arrived in Iran via the Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran link discussed above.

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.

### Japan and South Korea

Iran's primary interest in Japan and South Korea has been to expand commercial relations now that sanctions have been eased. Neither Japan nor South Korea has been heavily involved in security and strategic issues in the Middle East, but both countries are close allies of the United States. Their firms were consistently unwilling to risk their positions in the U.S. market by violating any U.S. sanctions on Iran, and these companies are now reportedly eager to engage in Iran's economy in light of the lifting of sanctions. Economic relations between Iran and South Korea and Japan, particularly oil purchases, are rebounding now that international sanctions have been lifted. Still, both countries are wary of Iran's reported military and technology relations with North Korea.

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<sup>144</sup> CRS In Focus IF10029, *China, U.S. Leadership, and Geopolitical Challenges in Asia*, by Susan V. Lawrence.

<sup>145</sup> For information on these issues, see CRS Report RS20871, *Iran Sanctions*, by Kenneth Katzman.

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.

Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe reportedly had planned to visit Iran in late August 2016, but postponed the visit. During the U.N. General Assembly meetings in New York (September 18-21, 2017), Abe accepted an invitation from President Rouhani to visit Iran, according to Abe's spokesperson., but no date for the visit was announced. If the visit goes forward, he would be the first leader of Japan to visit Iran since the Islamic Republic was established in 1979.

## **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. In the past, Iran reportedly funded and assisted in the retransfer of missile and possibly nuclear technology from North Korea to Syria.<sup>146</sup> North Korea also reportedly supplied Iran with small submarines. It is widely suspected that the two continue to cooperate on missile development, and possibly nuclear issues as well, but the extent of the cooperation, if any, is not known from published sources.

North Korea did not commit 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. After international sanctions on Iran's crude oil exports were removed, additional quantities of Iranian oil likely began reaching North Korea, most likely via China. 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.

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<sup>146</sup> <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303763804579183231117914364>.



## Latin America<sup>147</sup>

Some U.S. officials and some in Congress have expressed concerns about Iran's relations with leaders in Latin America that share Iran's distrust of the United States. Some experts and U.S. officials have asserted that Iran has sought to position IRGC-QF operatives and Hezbollah members in Latin America to potentially carry out terrorist attacks against Israeli targets in the region or even in the United States itself.<sup>148</sup> 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.<sup>149</sup> 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. However, few of the economic agreements that Ahmadinejad announced with Latin American countries were implemented, by all accounts.

**Figure 4. Latin America**



**Source:** Created by CRS.

President Rouhani has generally expressed only modest interest in further expanding ties in Latin America, perhaps in part because Latin America continues to account for less than 6% of Iran's total imports.<sup>150</sup> He made his first visit to the region in September 2016—three years into his presidency—in the course of traveling to the annual U.N. General Assembly meetings in New York. He went to several of the countries that Foreign Minister Zarif did when Zarif met with leaders in Cuba, Chile, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Venezuela in August 2016—the countries in that region that Ahmadinejad visited during his presidency as well. Iran's officials have stated that the purpose of the visits were to expand economic relations with Latin American countries now that international sanctions on Iran have been lifted.

In the 112<sup>th</sup> Congress, the Countering Iran in the Western Hemisphere Act, requiring the Administration to develop a strategy to counter Iran's influence in Latin America, was enacted (H.R. 3783, P.L. 112-220). The required report was provided to Congress in June 2013, asserting that "Iranian influence in Latin America and the Caribbean is waning" in part because of U.S. efforts to cause Latin American countries to assess the costs and benefits of closer relations with Iran.<sup>151</sup> Observers have directed particular attention to Iran's relationship with Venezuela (an

<sup>147</sup> 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.

<sup>148</sup> Ilan Berman. "Iran Courts Latin America." *Middle East Quarterly*, Summer 2012. <http://www.meforum.org/3297/iran-latin-america>.

<sup>149</sup> Posture Statement of General John F. Kelly, Commander, U.S. Southern Command, before the 114<sup>th</sup> Congress, Senate Armed Services Committee, March 12, 2015.

<sup>150</sup> <http://www.thedialogue.org/resources/are-iran-trade-ties-important-for-latin-america/>.

<sup>151</sup> State Department, "Annex A: Unclassified Summary of Policy Recommendations," June 2013.

OPEC member, as is Iran) because of its avowed anti-U.S. posture, and Argentina, because of the Iran-backed attacks on Israeli and Jewish targets there. Iran's relations with Cuba have been analyzed by experts in the past, but the U.S. opening to Cuba that began in late 2014 have eased concerns about Cuba-Iran relations. 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. Assertions in 2009 by some U.S. officials that Iran was significantly expanding its presence in Nicaragua were disputed by subsequent accounts.<sup>152</sup>

## Venezuela<sup>153</sup>

During Ahmadinejad's presidency, Iran had particularly close relations with Venezuela and its president, 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. 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."<sup>154</sup> Very 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.<sup>155</sup> 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.<sup>156</sup> On January 16, 2016, the United States "de-listed" PDVSA as stipulated in the JCPOA.

## Argentina<sup>157</sup>

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). Based on indictments and the investigative information that has been revealed, there is a broad consensus that these attacks were carried out by Hezbollah operatives, assisted by Iranian diplomats and their diplomatic privileges.

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.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> "Iran's Rumored 'Mega-Embassy' Set Off Alarms in U.S." *Washington Post*, June 13, 2009. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/07/12/AR2009071202337.html>.

<sup>153</sup> For more information, see CRS Report R43239, *Venezuela: Issues for Congress, 2013-2016*, by Mark P. Sullivan.

<sup>154</sup> Comments by President Barack Obama on "CNN: The Situation Room," July 11, 2012.

<sup>155</sup> <http://panampost.com/sabrina-martin/2015/04/06/iran-takes-venezuelan-money-passes-on-deliveries/>.

<sup>156</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/05/24/us-iran-usa-sanctions-idUSTRE74N47R20110524>.

<sup>157</sup> For more information, see CRS Report R43816, *Argentina: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Mark P. Sullivan and Rebecca M. Nelson.

<sup>158</sup> "Questions Swirl over Incident Involving Iranian Diplomat in Uruguay." *LatinNews Daily*, February 9, 2015.

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 allegedly conspiring with Iran to downplay the AMIA bombing issue. President Kirchner was succeeded in December 2015 by Mauricio Macri, who has not sought to broaden relations with Iran,<sup>159</sup> possibly explaining why Argentina apparently was not on the itinerary for Rouhani's regional visit in 2016.

## Africa

Sub-Saharan Africa has not generally been a focus of Iranian foreign policy—perhaps because of the relatively small size of most African economies and the limited ability of African countries to influence multilateral actions. Former President Ahmadinejad built ties to some African countries, both Christian and Muslim-dominated, but most African countries apparently did not want to risk their relationships with the United States by broadening relations with Iran. Iran has had a long-standing relationship with Sudan, but those ties have frayed substantially over the past several years, as discussed below. Few of the announced economic agreements between Iran and African countries were implemented, although Iran did establish an auto production plant in Senegal capable of producing 5,000 vehicles annually.<sup>160</sup>

The overwhelming majority of Muslims in Africa are Sunni, and Muslim-inhabited African countries have tended to be responsive to financial and diplomatic overtures from Iran's rival, Saudi Arabia. Amid the Saudi-Iran dispute in January 2016 over the Nimr execution, several African countries that Ahmadinejad had cultivated as potential allies broke relations with Iran outright, including Djibouti, Comoros, and Somalia, as well as Sudan. Senegal and Sudan have supported the Saudi-led military effort against the Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen—in Sudan's case with some forces. The UAE, in particular, has actively sought allies in Africa that might be willing to help counter Iran, particularly in Yemen.

Rouhani has made few statements on relations with countries in Africa and has apparently not made the continent a priority. However, the lifting of Iran sanctions could produce expanded

**Figure 5. Sudan**



**Source:** Created by CRS.

<sup>159</sup> <http://www.thedialogue.org/resources/are-iran-trade-ties-important-for-latin-america/>.

<sup>160</sup> Michael Baca. "Saudi Competition Gets in the Way of Iran's Outreach in Africa." *World Politics Review*, April 14, 2016.

economic ties between Iran and African countries. The increase in activity by Islamic State and Al Qaeda-affiliated Sunni extremist movements in Africa could cause Iran to increase its focus on politics and security issues in the region, and Iran remains positioned to intervene more actively if it chooses to do so.

The IRGC-QF has 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, to support friendly governments or factions, and act against Sunni extremist movements. 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 September 2014, Kenya detained two Iranian men on suspicion of intent to carry out a terrorist attack there. 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. In 2011, Senegal, even though it was a focus of Ahmadinejad's outreach, temporarily broke relations with Iran after accusing it of arming rebels in Senegal's Casamance region.

## Sudan

Iran has had close relations with the government of Sudan since the early 1990s, but that relationship appears to have frayed substantially since 2014 as Sudan has moved closer to Iran's rivals, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Sudan, like Iran, is still named by the United States as a state sponsor of terrorism. Iran's relations with Sudan provided Iran with leverage against Egypt, a U.S. ally, and a channel to supply weapons to Hamas and other pro-Iranian groups in the Gaza Strip.<sup>161</sup> The relationship began 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 the one with South Sudan, and the IRGC-QF reportedly armed and trained Sudanese forces, including the Popular Defense Force militia.<sup>162</sup> Some observers say Iranian pilots assisted Sudan's air force, and Iran's naval forces periodically visited Port Sudan. Israel has repeatedly accused Iran of shipping weapons bound for Gaza through Sudan<sup>163</sup> and, in October 2012, Israel bombed a weapons factory in Khartoum that Israel asserted was a source of Iranian weapons supplies for Hamas. In March 2014, Israel intercepted an Iranian shipment of rockets that were headed to Port Sudan.<sup>164</sup>

However, because Sudan is inhabited by Sunni Arabs, it has always been considered susceptible to overtures from Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries to distance itself from Iran. Since 2014, Saudi and UAE economic assistance to and investment in Sudan have caused Sudan to realign. In September 2014, the Sudan government closed all Iranian cultural centers in Sudan and expelled the cultural attaché and other Iranian diplomats on the grounds that Iran was using its facilities and personnel in Sudan to promote Shiite Islam.<sup>165</sup> In March 2015, Sudan joined the Saudi-led Arab coalition against the Houthis in Yemen, appearing to confirm that Sudan has significantly

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<sup>161</sup> Michael Lipin. "Sudan's Iran Alliance Under Scrutiny." VOA News, October 31, 2012. <http://www.voanews.com/content/article/1536472.html>.

<sup>162</sup> <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Security-Watch/terrorism-security/2012/1025/Did-Israel-just-blow-up-an-Iranian-weapons-factory-in-Sudan>.

<sup>163</sup> "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.

<sup>164</sup> <http://www.jpost.com/Defense/Israel-Navy-intercepts-Gaza-bound-Iranian-rocket-ship-near-Port-Sudan-344369>.

<sup>165</sup> Sudan Expels Iranian Diplomats and Closes Cultural Centers. *The Guardian*, September 2, 2014.

downgraded its strategic relations with Iran. In October 2016, a reported 300 Sudanese military personnel deployed to Yemen to fight against the Houthis alongside the Saudi-led coalition.<sup>166</sup> In December 2015, Sudan joined the Saudi-led anti-terrorism coalition discussed earlier. In January 2016, Sudan severed ties with Iran in connection with the Saudi execution of Nimr.

## Prospects and Alternative Scenarios

A key question is how U.S. actions might alter Iran's national security policies in ways more favorable to U.S. interests. To date, neither the JCPOA, nor U.S. or other sanctions, or any particular U.S. policy or strategy, has reduced Iran's regional influence. Senior Trump Administration officials, including President Trump, assert that Iran has increased its regional malign activities since the JCPOA began Implementation Day. However, many experts argue that Iran's expanded regional influence is due more to opportunities provided by the region's conflicts than to an increase in Iran's financial resources.

As noted throughout this report, Administration efforts against Iran have largely been limited to imposition of sanctions on additional Iran ballistic missile entities, IRGC-QF personnel, and cyber-related entities; cooperation with regional leaders who seek to limit Iranian influence; and deployment of U.S. forces to intercept Iranian weapons shipments and deter Iranian ground action. As Gen. Votel testified on February 27, 2018, "Countering the Iranian regime's malign influence in the region is a key component of [U.S.] efforts to defend allies from military aggression, bolster [U.S.] partners against coercion, and share responsibilities for the common defense." However, additional U.S. pressure on Iran—particularly if such pressure involves military action—would likely embroil the United States more deeply in regional conflicts.

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

- Iran is likely to continue to supply its regional allies and proxies with larger quantities of and more accurate weaponry, including rockets and short-range missiles.
- 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 Lebanon border. The potential for Iran-Israel conflict in Syria, and the possibility that clashes could escalate into a broader regional war, have increased over the past year.
- Iran benefits from the intra-GCC rift that could weaken and perhaps even cause the dissolution of the GCC alliance. A prolonged rift could complicate U.S. efforts to contain Iran militarily and hinder U.S. military operations in the region.
- The lifting of the U.N. ban on arms sales to Iran in October 2020 will enable Iran to modernize its armed forces, even if Russia and other suppliers refuse to defy any U.N. Security Council vote to disapprove such sales before then. Acquiring additional systems could strengthen its capabilities to the point where it can move ground forces across waterways such as the Strait of Hormuz.

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<sup>166</sup> Sudan sends ground troops to Yemen to boost Saudi-led coalition. Reuters, October 18, 2015. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/10/18/us-yemen-security-sudan-idUSKCN0SC0E120151018#EfvuzFr1DiRokyo9.99>.

- Iran could further increase its assistance to hardline opposition factions in Bahrain, which has apparently been limited to date to only small, militant underground groups.<sup>167</sup>
- Iran might succeed in emerging as a major regional energy and trading hub, both within and outside its participation in China's OBOR 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 the JCPOA, advance its reintegration into the international community, and avoid clashes with either the United States or Israel, Iran might be induced to shift its policies in ways that benefit U.S. and allied interests. Those who take this view argue that

- Iran might cooperate in identifying an alternative to Asad in Syria that resolves, or greatly attenuates, the civil conflict there and paves the way for Iran to draw down its forces and the numbers of militias it has recruited to fight there.
- 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 over Abu Musa and the two Tunbs islands in the Persian Gulf.
- Iran might take steps to join the WTO, which could improve the transparency of Iran's economy and its adherence to international economic conventions.
- Iran might increase the transparency of its financial system, including addressing all the concerns of the multilateral Financial Action Task Force (FATF) about the use of its banking system for money laundering and terrorism financing.
- Iran might offer concession in order to gain admission to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which could lead to broader cooperation between Iran and Central Asian states against the Islamic State or other terrorist organizations.
- Iran might seek to finalize major regional economic projects that benefit the whole region, including development of oil and gas fields in the Caspian Sea; gas pipeline linkages between Iran and Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman; the Iran-Pakistan natural gas pipeline; the development of the Chabahar port; and transportation routes linking Central Asia to China.

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

- As noted, protesters in over 80 Iranian cities in December 2017-January 2018 complained, in part, about the regime's use of resources for foreign intervention rather than to improve living standards. Fear of future unrest could cause the regime to reduce the scope of its interventions, to cut its defense budget, or limit its missile development program.
- The departure from the scene of the Supreme Leader could change Iran's foreign policy sharply, depending on the views of his successor.

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

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