

Iran Update



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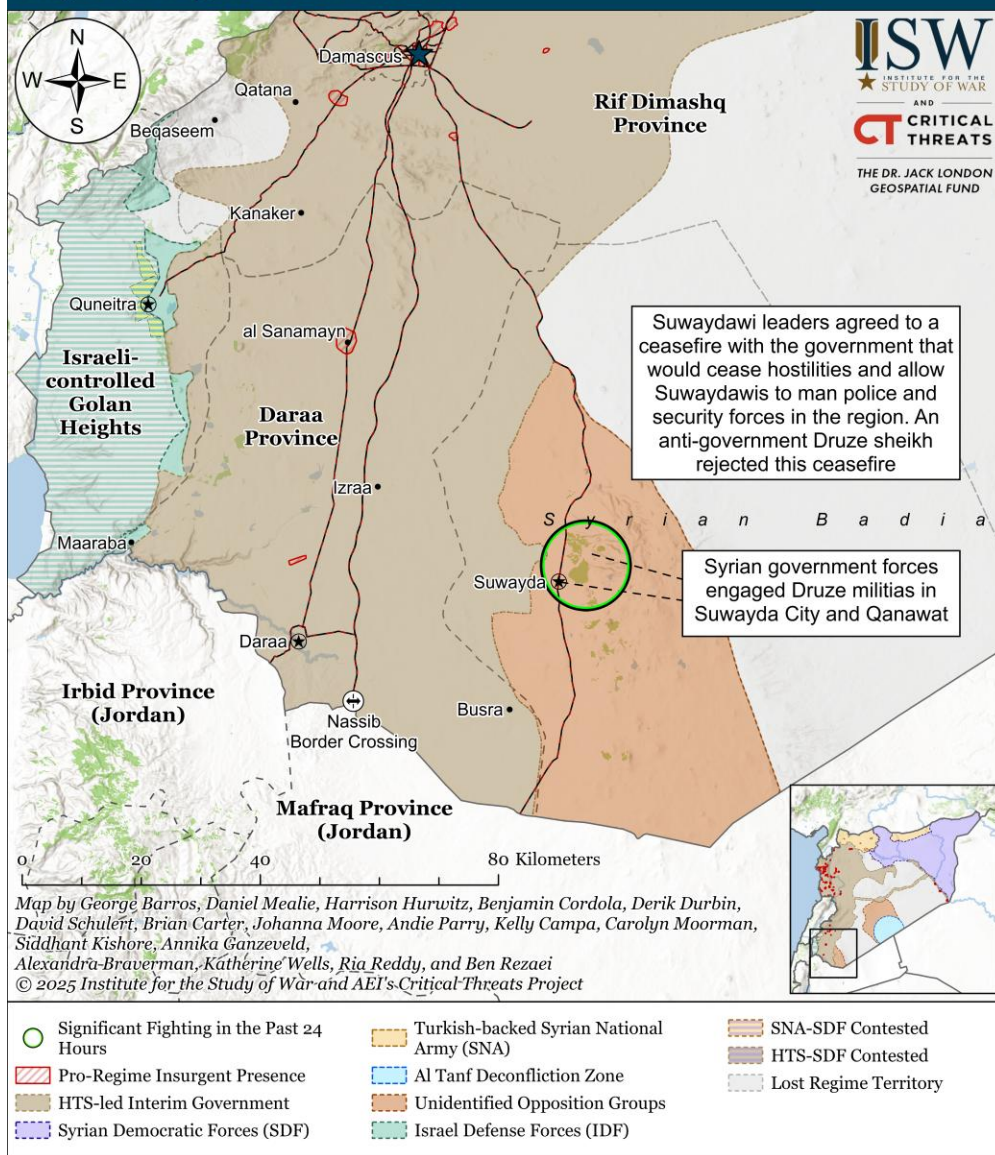
The Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute and the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) publish the Iran Update, which provides insights into Iranian and Iranian-sponsored activities that undermine regional stability and threaten US forces and interests. CTP-ISW publishes the Iran Update daily.

Israeli airstrikes in Syria are unlikely to achieve Israel’s stated aim of protecting the Druze in Syria because the strikes do not address the root cause of attacks committed by some members of the Syrian Ministry of Defense (MoD) against the Druze. These attacks largely stem from a lack of control over undisciplined MoD units.^[1] Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on July 16 that the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) is working to “save” the Druze and “eliminate” the “regime’s gangs,” referring to Syrian government forces that have conducted attacks against Druze.^[2] The IDF has conducted over 160 airstrikes across southern Syria since July 15, including a strike on the Syrian Presidential Palace and multiple strikes on the MoD headquarters in Damascus.^[3] The IDF also struck MoD personnel, tanks, vehicles, and military bases in Rif Dimashq, Daraa, and Suwayda provinces.^[4] Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz said on July 16 that the IDF will continue to “impose the demilitarization policy” until Syrian MoD units withdraw from Suwayda Province.^[5]

It is highly unlikely that Syrian President Ahmed al Shara ordered or encouraged the abuses that some MoD forces have committed in Suwayda. The abuses likely stem from a lack of control over undisciplined units. The transitional government has repeatedly called on MoD members to cease violations and has implemented some measures, such as the deployment of military police, to arrest perpetrators. MoD forces’ violations disrupt Damascus’s ability to secure Druze support for a settlement to the crisis.^[6]

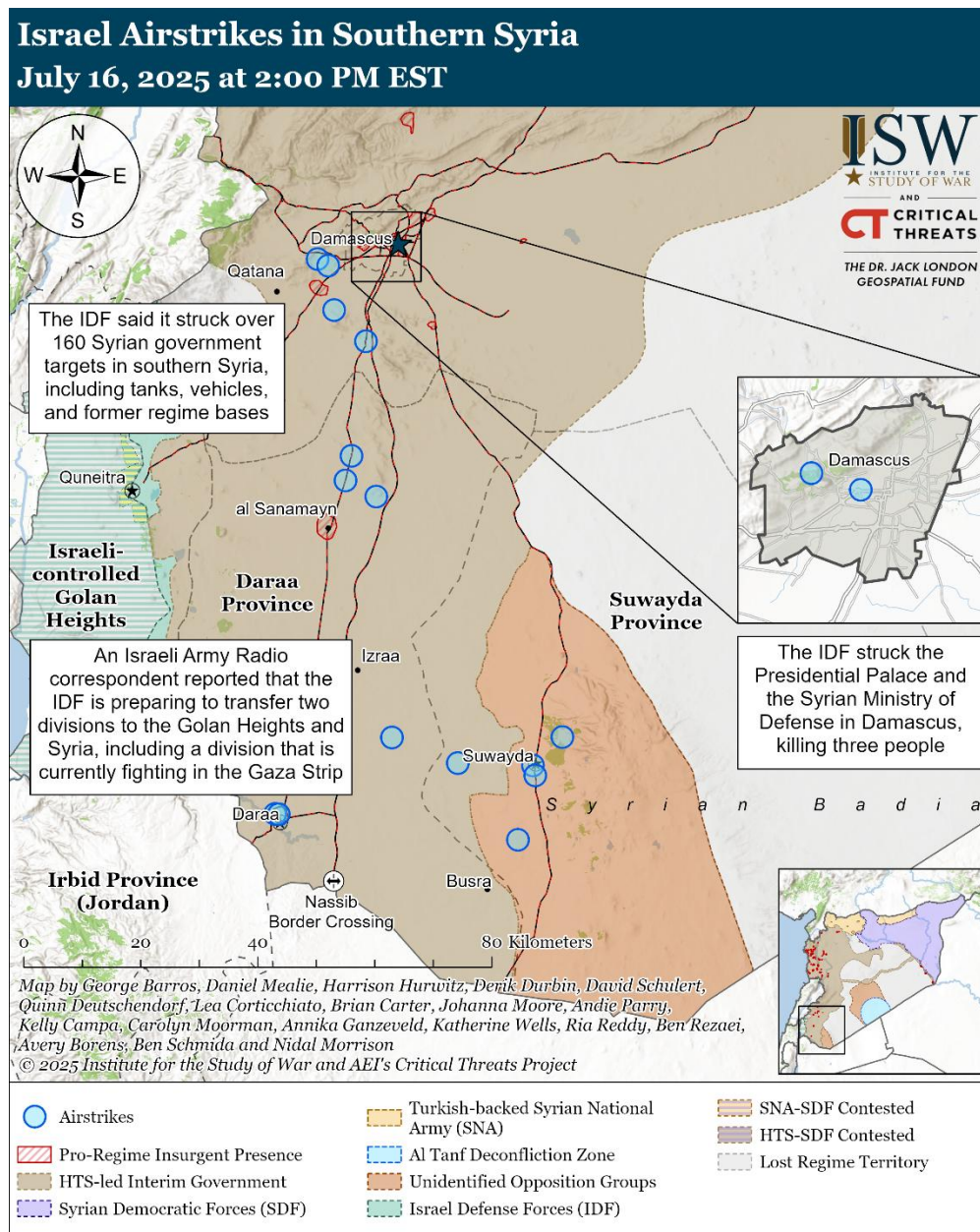
Israel conducted these strikes after the United States demanded that Israel cease all airstrikes in southern Syria on July 15. US Secretary of State Marco Rubio said on July 16 that the United States is very concerned about Israeli strikes and “want[s] the fighting to stop.”^[7] An Israeli Army Radio correspondent reported that the IDF is preparing to transfer two divisions to the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights and Syrian border area, including the 98th Reserve Paratrooper Division and another unspecified reserve division.^[8] The 98th Division is currently deployed in the Gaza Strip, where it has operated since May 2025.^[9] The IDF also diverted additional aircraft to Syria.^[10]

Assessed Control of Terrain in Southwestern Syria July 16, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



A lone Druze faction is undermining the Syrian transitional government's diplomatic efforts with pro-government Suwaydawi leaders. Prominent Druze Sheikh Hikmat al Hijri publicly rejected a ceasefire agreed upon by the transitional government and pro-government Druze leaders on July 16. This marks the third time that Hijri has rejected a government-Suwaydawi ceasefire since the fighting began on July 13.^[11] Druze militias loyal to Hijri resumed attacks on government forces after the ceasefire was announced on July 16.^[12] These militias include the Suwayda Military Council, which retains ties to Assad-era generals.^[13] Hijri only represents a fraction of the Syrian Druze community, however. Several prominent Druze leaders, such as Sheikh Yousef Jarbou, have committed to working with the Shara government and continue to do so even after government forces entered Suwayda and committed abuses against residents.^[14] Pro-government Druze leaders like Jarbou and Hamoud al Hanawi have a fractious history of political rivalry with Hijri, and Hijri was often at odds

with Men of Dignity founder and father of Laith al Balous, Wahid al Balous.[15] Balous and other leaders have rejected Hijri's call for international intervention to protect the Druze in Suwayda Province.[16] Hijri called for the "unconditional liberation" of Suwayda Province from government forces, which suggests that he is unwilling to negotiate with the transitional government without a complete withdrawal of government forces from Suwayda.[17] The ceasefire agreement that Hijri broke on July 16 was nearly identical to a May 2025 agreement between Suwaydawi leaders, the transitional government, and Hijri himself.[18] Both the broken ceasefire agreement and the May 2025 agreement appear designed to minimize abuses against civilians by allowing Suwaydawis to man local police and General Security Service (GSS) forces. The agreement also created a fact-finding commission to investigate abuses committed during the recent conflict.



The Syrian government remains responsible for holding the perpetrators of abuses against Druze accountable, even if the government does not order or support these abuses. Suwayda-based media reported on July 16 that MoD forces have executed Druze men in their homes and in city streets.[19] The outlet, citing unspecified local sources, also accused military forces of raiding homes, looting, and threatening residents at gunpoint.[20] The pro-government Men of Dignity condemned government forces' "excessive use of violence" against civilians and criticized government forces' lack of discipline and violation of agreements.[21] Shara issued a statement that "strongly" condemned attacks against Suwaydawi residents and promised that the attacks will not go "unpunished." [22] The Syrian government must hold undisciplined units, individuals, and commanders responsible for their crimes. Not all MoD units that have deployed to Suwayda in recent days are responsive to the chain of command, as evidenced by these violations. The Syrian transitional government's ability and willingness to hold security forces accountable for crimes committed against civilians will be one factor that influences its ability to establish security and stability in southern Syria. A complete breakdown of trust between the government and the Druze community would make it very difficult for the government to build lasting stability in southern Syria. These attacks also risk significantly eroding other Syrian minority communities' trust of the Syrian government and its motives, regardless of whether or how the government holds perpetrators accountable. Other minority communities that fear that the government will not protect them, such as the Kurds, may view these attacks as confirmation of their fears.

The United States and the E3 (the United Kingdom, Germany, and France) have reportedly set an end-of-August deadline for Iran to agree to a nuclear deal before the E3 triggers the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) snapback mechanism.[23] Axios reported on July 16 that US Secretary of State Marco Rubio spoke with the E3 foreign ministers on July 14 and set this deadline, citing three sources familiar with the call.[24] The JCPOA snapback mechanism allows JCPOA signatories to reimpose UN Security Council sanctions on Iran in the event of "significant non-performance by Iran of JCPOA commitments." [25] The snapback mechanism under the JCPOA expires on October 18, 2025. The process to impose snapback sanctions takes between 45 and 65 days from when the initial non-compliance complaint is issued, which means that the E3 would have to initiate the process no later than September 3.[26] The E3 reportedly seeks to engage Iran and push for verifiable commitments, such as renewed cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency and the removal of Iran's 60 percent enriched uranium stockpile, ahead of the deadline to avoid triggering the snapback mechanism.[27]

Iran has maintained its position on its right to enrich uranium in Iran, which makes it very unlikely that Iran would accept a nuclear agreement by the end of August that required Iran to halt domestic uranium enrichment. Iranian Parliamentary National Security and Foreign Policy Committee member Alaeddin Boroujerdi reiterated the Iranian regime's official position on July 16 that Iran will never accept zero enrichment.[28] The Iranian Parliament separately rejected renewed talks with the United States on July 16 unless certain preconditions are met.[29] Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf stated that the preconditions include guarantees against future US or Israeli strikes and compensation for recent damage.[30] Ghalibaf's statement does not reflect the regime's official position and aligns with the position of an anti-negotiation camp within Iran, which is largely comprised of hardliners. This camp has continued to advocate for stringent

preconditions that effectively amount to rejecting renewed negotiations.[31] CTP-ISW previously assessed that these preconditions are likely non-starters for the United States and Israel.[32]

Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei underscored the need for national unity to stabilize the regime amid fissures between regime factions on July 16.[33] Khamenei praised the Iranian people's response to the recent war during a meeting with senior judiciary officials and emphasized that "it is everyone's duty to preserve this national unity." [34] Khamenei emphasized that individuals with different religious beliefs and opposing political views must unite to "defend Iran and the regime." [35] Khamenei cautioned Iranian officials against raising "unnecessary criticisms" and disputing minor issues, noting that such behavior undermines state unity.[36] Khamenei's remarks come as moderate elements in the regime appear to be trying to use the Israel-Iran War and its aftermath to increase their political influence in the regime. Former reformist President Hassan Rouhani reportedly lobbied senior clerics in Qom to encourage Khamenei to accept a ceasefire during the war and has issued public statements urging de-escalation and renewed engagement with the United States.[37] Former Iranian Prime Minister and 2009 Green Movement leader Mir Hossein Mousavi separately called on July 11 for a referendum to establish a constitutional assembly. Mousavi warned that public solidarity during the Israel-Iran War should not be mistaken for "approval of the government" and that the war was "the bitter result of a series of grave errors." [38]

Khamenei's remarks also come amid divisions within the region over how Iran should engage the United States following the Israel-Iran War. Khamenei asserted that individuals who oppose Iranian officials on "diplomatic or military issues" must express their opposition in line with regime policy.[39] Khamenei may have been referring to efforts by the anti-negotiation camp in the regime to resist efforts to resume nuclear talks with the United States.[40] This camp has presented preconditions for negotiations that effectively amount to rejecting renewed negotiations, as noted above. Supreme Leader International Affairs Adviser Ali Akbar Velayati stated on July 14 that Iran would accept negotiations without "preconditions" if the United States respects Iranian red lines, which include the right to enrich uranium on Iranian soil.[41] Velayati may have been referring to the preconditions that have been presented by the anti-negotiation camp. The *Washington Post* reported on July 13 that there is a "consensus" among Iran's political class to resume nuclear negotiations with the United States.[42]

Iran is likely concerned that Syrian cooperation with Azerbaijan could increase Turkish influence in the South Caucasus. Syrian President Ahmed al Shara visited Baku, Azerbaijan, on July 12.[43] Shara signed a memorandum of understanding with Azerbaijan's state oil company to export Azerbaijani gas to Syria via Turkey during his visit to Baku.[44] Iranian state media criticized Shara's visit to Baku and claimed that his trip was part of an effort to diminish Iranian influence in the South Caucasus.[45] A Syrian source close to Shara told Israeli media that Shara met with Israeli officials in Baku on July 12.[46] Iran opposes Azerbaijan's ties with Israel and has historically accused Israel of using Azerbaijani territory to conduct operations in Iran, including during the Israel-Iran War.[47]

Iranian media separately described the Zangezur Corridor as a Turkish attempt to extend Turkish influence into Eurasia.[48] The Zangezur Corridor is a Turkish-Azerbaijani proposed transportation route that would connect Azerbaijan proper to the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic. The Zangezur Corridor would sever Iranian land access to Russia and Europe via Armenia.[49] Iranian media stated

on July 16 that the Zangezur Corridor would also prevent Iran from being able to militarily support Armenia against Azerbaijan.[50] Iran has become increasingly concerned about the growth of Turkey's influence in the South Caucasus in recent years, particularly since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Iran is concerned that Russia's focus on the war in Ukraine has left a power vacuum for other regional actors, such as Turkey and Israel, to exploit.

Iran continues to send advanced weapons to the Houthis, including cruise and anti-ship missiles, which the Houthis regularly use to attack Israel and international shipping in the Red Sea.[51] The Yemeni National Resistance Front (NRF) announced on July 16 that the NRF coast guard intercepted over 750 tons of munitions and hardware with instruction manuals written in Farsi from an unnamed US-sanctioned company affiliated with the Iranian Defense and Armed Forces Logistics Ministry.[52] The NRF is an anti-Houthi paramilitary group led by former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh's nephew, Brigadier General Tariq Saleh.[53] The shipment included hundreds of advanced cruise missiles, anti-ship and anti-aircraft missiles, warheads, and other missile components, as well as hundreds of drone engines, air defense equipment, radar systems, and communications equipment. The NRF's interdiction of the Iranian weapons shipment comes amid continued Houthi missile and drone attacks targeting Israel and renewed Houthi attacks on international shipping. The Houthis recently attacked and sank two commercial bulk carriers off the coast of Hudaydah, western Yemen, on July 6 and 7.[54]

Some Iraqi parliamentarians, including Shia Coordination Framework-aligned Deputy Parliament Speaker Mohsen al Mandalawi, may have threatened to remove Parliament Speaker Mahmoud al Mashhadani to pressure Mashhadani to place the Popular Mobilization Authority Law on the parliamentary agenda. The Shia Coordination Framework is a loose coalition of Shia political parties, some of which Iran backs. The Parliament Speaker and their two deputies are responsible for "jointly" determining the agenda.[55] The Popular Mobilization Authority Law would integrate Iranian-backed Iraqi militias that operate outside of the Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) into the PMF before the PMF integrates into the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF).[56] A parliamentarian with an unknown affiliation told Iraqi media on July 14 that 80 parliamentarians signed a petition to remove Mashhadani due to Mashhadani's "monopoly" on decision-making that "reflects a new sectarian trend." [57] The parliamentarian may have been accusing Mashhadani of helping pass the General Amnesty Law in January 2025 while not helping pass the Popular Mobilization Authority Law.[58] The General Amnesty Law is largely supported by Sunni parties. Iraqi media separately reported that a "verbal altercation" between Mashhadani and several Shia Coordination Framework parliamentarians, including Mandalawi, during a parliament session on July 14 led to the session's postponement.[59] A parliamentary source told Iraqi media on July 15 that Mashhadani and Mandalawi reconciled and agreed to resume the parliamentary session.[60]

The Popular Mobilization Authority Law was raised during the July 16 parliament session even though it was not formally placed on the July 16 parliamentary agenda.[61] It is notable that the law was raised in parliament after Mashhadani and Mandalawi reconciled. Iraqi media reported that Kurdish and Sunni parliamentarians left the July 16 session in protest to the reading of the law because the law was raised without prior "political consensus" or discussion in relevant committees.[62] Mandalawi reportedly chaired the parliament session on July 14 and directed the Parliamentary Security and

Defense Committee to complete all suggested amendments to the Popular Mobilization Authority Law and submit the final version of the law to Mashhadani for a vote.[63]

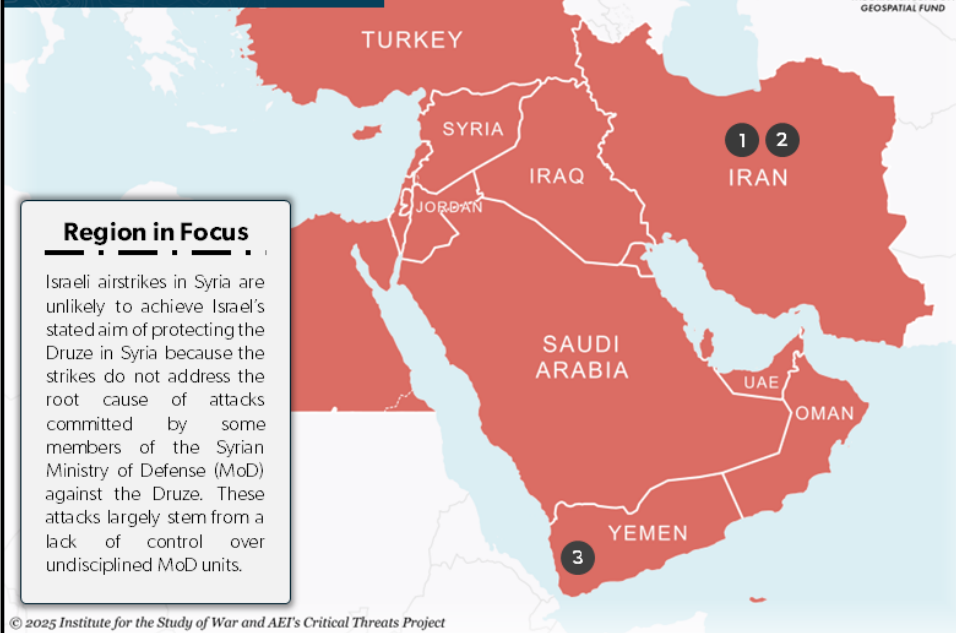
The Popular Mobilization Authority Law includes provisions that require PMF brigades to only carry out orders from the prime minister, as already required under Iraqi law, and refrain from attacking US forces, interests, and other unspecified targets outside of Iraq.[64] The United States has pressured the Iraqi federal government to dissolve and disarm the PMF and has reportedly threatened to sanction PMF leaders in recent months.[65] CTP-ISW previously assessed that the integration of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias into the Iraqi armed forces must be predicated on a commitment by the militias to stop abiding by Iranian orders and a commitment by the Iraqi federal government to respond to any militia attack on US or partner interests in the Middle East.[66] The integration of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias into the armed forces in a way that does not meet these criteria would harm US interests in the region.

Key Takeaways:

- **Southern Syria:** Israeli airstrikes in Syria are unlikely to achieve Israel's stated aim of protecting the Druze in Syria because the strikes do not address the root cause of attacks committed by some members of the Syrian Ministry of Defense (MoD) against the Druze. These attacks largely stem from a lack of control over undisciplined MoD units.
- **Iran Nuclear Talks:** The United States and the E3 have reportedly set an end-of-August deadline for Iran to agree to a nuclear deal before the E3 triggers the JCPOA snapback mechanism. Iran has maintained its position on its right to enrich uranium in Iran, which makes it very unlikely that Iran would accept a nuclear agreement by the end of August that required Iran to halt domestic uranium enrichment.
- **Iran After the War:** Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei underscored the need for national unity to stabilize the regime amid fissures between regime factions. Khamenei's remarks come as moderate elements in the regime appear to be trying to use the Israel-Iran War and its aftermath to increase their political influence in the regime.
- **Iran-Houthi Coordination:** Iran continues to send advanced weapons to the Houthis, including cruise and anti-ship missiles, which the Houthis regularly use to attack Israel and international shipping in the Red Sea.

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Region in Focus

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Iran

The Iranian Parliament approved three Iranian politicians as legal experts for the Guardian Council on July 16.[67] The Guardian Council is comprised of 12 members, including six clerics and six legal experts.[68] The Guardian Council plays a key role in Iranian elections and vets candidates and legislation.[69] Parliament approved Hadi Tahan Nazif and Gholam Reza Mola Beygi, who are both retaining their seats for another six-year term.[70] Parliament also approved Behzad Pour Seyyed, who has served as deputy for parliamentary laws in the Iranian Parliament, deputy head of the Judiciary's Research Institute, and deputy legal affairs chief of Iran's Judiciary.[71] Pour Seyyed replaced Mohammad Hassan Sadeghi Moghadam, whose term expired on July 9.[72] Sadeghi

Moghadam previously served as deputy head of Iran's General Inspection Organization under former President Ebrahim Raisi.[73] The US Treasury Department sanctioned Sadeghi Moghadam in 2020 for obstructing free elections.[74] Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei reappointed senior clerics Ahmad Khatami, Alireza Araf, and Ahmad Hosseini Khorasani as Guardian Council clerical members on July 15.[75]

Iraq

Likely Iranian-backed Iraqi militants conducted at least six one-way drone attacks targeting four oil fields in Iraqi Kurdistan and Kirkuk Province on July 16.[76]

Unidentified actors launched three attack drones targeting the Norwegian-operated Peshkabour and Tawke oil fields in Duhok Province.[77] The Iraqi Kurdistan Region's Counter-Terrorism Service reported that the attacks caused material damage that suspended production at both oil fields.[78] Unidentified militants conducted at least two drone attacks targeting the US-operated Ain Sifni oil field in Duhok Province.[79] An unspecified security source told Iraqi media that a drone landed near the Iraqi state-owned Bai Hassan oil field in Kirkuk Province.[80] Likely Iranian-backed Iraqi militias previously conducted at least two drone attacks targeting two oil fields in Iraqi Kurdistan on July 14 and 15.[81] These attacks come as Iranian-backed Iraqi politicians have used a variety of legal and illegal means to sideline political opponents and try to retain their majority in parliament in the November 2025 elections.[82] Iranian-backed Iraqi militias previously conducted rocket attacks on Kurdish oil and gas fields between March and June 2022 to pressure Kurdish parties to withdraw their support for Iraqi Shia nationalist cleric Moqtada al Sadr. This strategy sought to deprive Sadr of allies to secure a majority in parliament.[83] Kurdish parties, including the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), aligned with the Shia Coordination Framework following Sadr's failure to form a majority coalition and subsequent withdrawal from parliament.

Iranian-backed Iraqi actors denied on July 15 that Iranian-backed Iraqi militias were responsible for the recent drone attacks targeting oil facilities. Iraqi media reported on July 15 that the Shia Coordination Framework (SCF) "absolved" the militias of blame for the recent attacks on oil facilities.[84] The Shia Coordination Framework is a loose coalition of Shia political parties, some of which have armed wings. SCF member and parliamentarian Amer al Fayez said that militia leaders denied any connection to the drone attacks.[85] The militias may suffer from a lack of discipline among lower-ranking fighters who attempt to independently launch drones at oil fields in Iraq. Militia leadership may also allow fighters to conduct attacks without publicly sanctioning them.

Reported One-Way Drone Attacks on Oil Fields in Iraqi Kurdistan July 14 to July 16, 2025



Syria

See topline section.

Arabian Peninsula

The Houthis launched two drones targeting an unspecified “sensitive” site in the Negev Desert and one drone targeting Eilat Port in southern Israel on July 15.[86] The Israeli Air Force intercepted a Houthi drone before it crossed into Israeli territory on July 15.[87] The Houthis have launched hundreds of drones and ballistic missiles targeting Israel since the Houthis began their campaign to enforce an economic blockade on Israel in October 2023.[88]

The Palestinian Territories and Lebanon

Lebanon’s central bank banned all licensed Lebanese banking institutions from working directly or indirectly with Hezbollah’s primary financial institution, al Qard al Hassan, on July 15.[89] The Lebanese Central Bank announced that it would prosecute and penalize financial institutions that interact with al Qard al Hassan. The Central Bank added that it could suspend institutions’ licenses and freeze institutions’ assets.[90] Al Qard al Hassan is one of Hezbollah’s main banking and financial arms and Hezbollah uses it to transfer, manage, and receive funds.[91] The United States sanctioned al Qard al Hassan in 2007 for enabling Hezbollah to conduct “financial activities and gain access to the international financial system.”[92] Al Qard al Hassan employees often create bank accounts at local Lebanese banks that enable al Qard al Hassan to conduct transactions on behalf of Hezbollah and gives Hezbollah access to the international financial system.[93] An unspecified Lebanese official told Reuters on July 15 that the Central Bank’s decision reflected US

pressure on Lebanon to take action against Hezbollah's financial wing.[94] US Special Envoy Thomas Barrack described the bank's decision as a "step in the right direction." [95]

The Central Bank's crackdown on al Qard al Hassan will likely complicate Hezbollah's ability to compensate its fighters and provide services to Lebanese civilians, which could reduce Hezbollah's domestic support. Hezbollah has struggled to maintain its financial commitments to fighters following the Israel-Lebanon conflict in late 2024. Hezbollah indefinitely suspended compensation payments to its fighters on June 25, which are distributed by al Qard al Hassan.[96] Al Qard al Hassan also previously froze compensation payments in February 2025.[97] Hezbollah has historically used financial benefits, including pensions and payments for the families of deceased fighters, to retain its support base among Lebanese Shia.[98] Disruptions to Hezbollah's ability to provide its support base with promised benefits could reduce support among this base for Hezbollah.



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