

Research Briefing

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# Iran's influence in the Middle East



## Summary

- 1 Where does Iran have influence?
- 2 Limiting Iranian influence and power
- 3 Iran's foreign policy in 2024

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## Summary

Concern about Iranian foreign policy is not limited to its nuclear programme, but also to its proxy forces and alliances with violent groups across the Middle East, several of which are UK-designated terrorist organisations.

Since the Iranian revolution of 1979, when the Shah was overthrown and Ayatollah Khomeini returned to the country, the Iranian regime has [sought to embed its influence across the region](#).

To do this, Iran has countered conventional military forces with a network of associated militia groups and other non-state actors, starting with Hezbollah in Lebanon in the 1980s. The [Islamic revolutionary guard corps](#) (IRGC) Quds force has been key to this process.

Instability and weak states in Lebanon (from the 1980s), Iraq (from 2003) and Yemen (from 2014) provided a space for Iran to develop alliances with Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi militias, and Yemen's Houthis. In the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad also receive Iranian support. Iran is a long-standing ally of Syria and its President Assad.

This briefing describes Iran's activity in five arenas in the Middle East, what the UK and its partners have done in response, and the situation in 2024.

## Why does Iran seek greater influence?

International Crisis Group [cites several reasons for Iran's strategy](#):

- To seek to secure the regime through a “forward defence” strategy, meaning it battles its enemies in other states (such as Lebanon, Iraq).
- Iran is a Shia-Muslim majority state, while most regimes in the Middle East are governed by Sunni Muslim rulers—notably Saudi Arabia, one of its significant regional rivals. Iran claims to act to protect Shia Muslims.
- To combat the United States and Israel and regional competitors.

## Where is Iran influential, and why?

Iran has targeted weak states and generally supported non-state actors that are carving out areas of autonomy within them. The primary exception is its long-standing alliance with Syria's ruling President Bashar al-Assad, which has strengthened during the country's civil war. In summary:

- Iran has [supported Lebanese Hezbollah](#) since Lebanon's civil war in the 1980s. Hezbollah maintains a separate military force to the state and provides basic services in areas with substantial Shia Muslim populations (from where it gets a majority of its support). The absence of a president in Lebanon since 2022 [constrains the ability of its government to act](#).
- Following the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the arrival of Islamic State/Daesh in the mid-2010s, Iran has [financed and trained Shia militia groups](#) which stand as a separate force to Iraq's military. Political groups associated with them [performed well in the latest local elections in 2023](#). There are negotiations on [withdrawing US troops from Iraq](#).
- In Yemen's civil war, Iran has [supported the Houthis](#), who oppose the internationally recognised government (which a Saudi-led military coalition has intervened to support). Expectations for a political settlement dissipated because of [Houthi attacks on shipping in 2023/24](#).
- In Syria, President Assad was opposed by Gulf Arab states when conflict broke out in the country in 2011/12. Iran has provided significant military and economic support to his regime, as has Russia. Gulf states are now [beginning to reconcile with Assad](#). This may dilute Iran's influence.
- In the Occupied Palestinian Territories, from the 1980s Iran has supported groups including [Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad](#). The US does not believe [Iran planned the 7 October 2023 assault on Israel](#).

## Outlook for Iran's foreign policy

Talks to re-establish the [2015 nuclear agreement](#) stalled in 2022, when they were reportedly [in their final stage](#). The backdrop of [Iran's support for Russia in Ukraine](#), criticism of [its response to the 2022 Mahsa Amini protests](#), and [regional escalation since October 2023](#), offer challenges to new talks.

Some elements of the 2015 agreement, such as the [UN arms embargo](#) on Iran and UN prohibition on [exporting and importing certain missiles and drones](#), have now expired (though the UK, EU and US have [continued these sanctions](#)).

The US and UK [remain committed to Iran never acquiring a nuclear weapon](#). Iran's competitors in the region, such as Saudi Arabia, have previously called for any new nuclear agreement [to be widened to curtail Iran's wider military activity](#). Whether any potential agreement would curtail Iran's wider influence in the region is unknown, but unlikely. In 2022, the Iranian Government rejected the notion that matters of "national strength" [were for negotiation](#).

[Iran joining the BRICS](#) bloc of economies in 2024 (including China, and alongside the UAE and Egypt) is seen as an attempt to combat its global isolation as part of its ["look east" policy](#). However, US sanctions [impede the degree to which Iran can trade](#). Iran's new president is seeking the removal of sanctions and says he is [committed to reviving the 2015 nuclear agreement](#). However, it is Iran's supreme leader who dominates Iranian foreign policy.

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# 1 Where does Iran have influence?

## 1.1 Why does Iran seek influence abroad?

The Iranian regime hopes its efforts will strengthen its regional influence and undermine that of the US and its Gulf allies, as well as Israel. It is seeking to:

- Protect and export the 1979 revolution, when the last Shah was overthrown, and the Islamic Republic established. Iran fought an eight-year war with Iraq from 1980. Iraq had the backing of most Arab states.
- Obtain allies abroad to end its isolation (Iran is one of the most sanctioned countries in the world).
- Protect longstanding allies, such as the Syrian regime.
- Protect Shia Muslims (Iran is a Shia-majority state, most other Middle Eastern states have Sunni Muslim rulers and majority Sunni populations).
- Compensate for its relatively weak conventional military capabilities and instead build up a network of affiliates and proxies to protect it. This is called the “forward” or “mosaic” defence” strategy, whereby it combats enemies outside Iran or uses its armed groups as a deterrent.<sup>1</sup>

Iranian support is not universal—some domestic opponents question its cost at a time when [Iran's economy is struggling](#).<sup>2</sup> The US, UK and Gulf powers consider these offensive acts disruptive towards regional stability.

### Iran's regional affiliates

This research briefing covers Iranian influence in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

Iran is a Shia-majority country, and its main allies in Iraq and Lebanon are also Shia Muslims (though Hamas in Gaza is Sunni).

The US designated Iran as a [state sponsor of terrorism in 1984](#). The US State Department's 2022 report on global terrorism described Iran as the “leading state sponsor of terrorism”, supporting groups in Syria, Bahrain, Iraq, Yemen,

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<sup>1</sup> International Crisis Group, [Iran's priorities in a turbulent Middle East](#), 13 April 2018

<sup>2</sup> [Khamenei defends Iran's regional strategic influence](#), Al-Monitor, 10 March 2022; [Gaza war and the question of public apathy in Iran](#), BBC Monitoring, 13 November 2023

Lebanon, and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. The 2019 terrorism report said that Iran spent up to US\$700 million each year in support.<sup>3</sup>

## Iran's regional affiliates



From Council on Foreign Relations, [Iran's regional armed network](#), updated 15 April 2024, [CC BY-NC-ND-4.0](#). Image cropped. Note that the UK Government refers to the "Occupied Palestinian Territories".

## How much control does Iran have over these groups?

While Iran may work closely with these groups and provide military and other support, they are not a monolithic bloc, and each have their own history, interests, and ties with each other and with Iran. In sharing strategic interests and hostilities (such as against Israel and the United States), there is substantial overlap in their activities and targets.<sup>4</sup>

In the November 2023 pause in the Israel-Hamas conflict, for example, groups in Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen that had been launching attacks largely ended these to coincide with the pause arranged between Israel and Hamas.<sup>5</sup>

The below sections on Iran's influence in five areas provides analysis on the relationship between these groups, each other, and Iran.

<sup>3</sup> US State Department, [Country reports on terrorism: 2022](#), November 2023 and [Country reports on terrorism 2019](#), 2020

<sup>4</sup> A. Krieg and J. Rickli, *Surrogate warfare: the transformation of war in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*, 2019, pp174-5

<sup>5</sup> Institute for the Study of War, [Iran update](#), 1 December 2023 and [Iran update](#), 30 November 2023

## Further reading on Iran's regional presence

- International Crisis Group, [Iran's priorities in a turbulent Middle East](#), 2018. Summary of Iran's strategic priorities and the "perception gap" between Iran and other regional powers.
- International Institute of Strategic Studies, [Iran's networks of influence in the Middle East](#), 2019. Surveys Iranian actions across the region.
- Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), [War by proxy: Iran's growing footprint in the Middle East](#), 2019. Snapshots of Iranian actions.
- Brookings Institute, [How Iran's regional ambitions have developed since 1979](#), 2019. Timeline of key events since 1979.
- Foreign Policy, [Iran's grand strategy has fundamentally changed](#), 2023.
- European Council on Foreign Relations, [Beyond proxies: Iran's deeper strategy in Syria and Lebanon](#), 2024

## What is the Islamic revolutionary guard corps (IRGC)?

The IRGC was established as a counterweight to Iran's regular armed forces following the Iranian revolution of 1979, in which the last Shah was overthrown. Iran's constitution mandates the IRGC to not only preserve Iran's borders but to extend Iran's ruling ideology abroad. It is controlled by the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, not the Iranian president.<sup>6</sup>

The IRGC has around 200,000 personnel across its naval, army and air force branches and can mobilise 600,000 through its [Basij paramilitary force](#). The IRGC's Quds force operates abroad to support armed groups elsewhere in the Middle East through providing training, finance, arms, and advice.

Within Iran, IRGC personnel exert influence in both Iran's parliament and government. The IRGC and the Basij have also been responsible for suppressing internal dissent. The IRGC also controls several key industries and companies.

The IRGC was designated a terrorist organisation by the United States in 2019. The UK, European Union and US apply sanctions against it. Section 2.4 of this briefing has more on the debate in the UK on how to address the IRGC.

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<sup>6</sup> This box from Council on Foreign Relations, [Iran's revolutionary guards](#), updated 17 April 2024

## 1.2

## Hezbollah in Lebanon

## Strength and role in Lebanon

Hezbollah is a [Shia Muslim military and political group](#), opposed to Israel and American and allied presence in the Middle East. It is simultaneously part of the Lebanese political system, with representatives in parliament and having political allies, while also managing its own network of social services and maintaining a military wing.<sup>7</sup>

Hezbollah first emerged as a group in 1982, during the Lebanese civil war and following Israel's military intervention to combat Palestinian armed groups based in Lebanon. During the conflict, Iran provided funds and training to Hezbollah, who undertook attacks against French and US troops in the Lebanon (who were present as part of a multinational peacekeeping force, the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon). Hezbollah continued to attack Israeli troops in southern Lebanon until their withdrawal in 2000.

Hezbollah is often described as one of the “most heavily armed, non-state military forces in the world”.<sup>8</sup> An estimate by the think-tank Atlantic Council in 2021 put its strength at around 50,000 fighters and reservists and its rocket arsenal as numbering between 120,000 and 200,000.<sup>9</sup>

In his study of the group, academic Augustus Norton also argues that while Hezbollah is a “nemesis of many Lebanese” (specifically Sunni Muslims, Christians, and some Shias), Hezbollah is “Lebanon’s most powerful and best organised political player” and, through working in coalition with political allies, capable of “stymie[ng] [Lebanese] politics”.<sup>10</sup>

## Iranian support for Hezbollah

In 2022, the US State Department judged Hezbollah as “closely allied” to Iran but “occasionally act[ing] independently” from it.<sup>11</sup> Academic analysis debates how far Hezbollah is an ally, partner, or proxy for Iran, some stressing its local context and strength, but analysis notes there is sufficient alignment in objectives and ideological outlook, and confidence of Iran in Hezbollah, to justify Iran’s considerable support for it. Support has included:<sup>12</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Council on Foreign Relations, [What is Hezbollah?](#), updated 14 October 2023 and Center for Strategic Studies, [Examining extremism: Hezbollah](#), 26 March 2024

<sup>8</sup> [What is Hezbollah and will it go to war with Israel?](#), BBC News, 3 November 2023

<sup>9</sup> Atlantic Council, [Counting the cost: Avoiding another war between Israel and Hezbollah](#), 13 May 2020

<sup>10</sup> A.R. Norton, *Hezbollah: A short history*, 2018, p210

<sup>11</sup> US State Department, [Country reports on terrorism 2022](#), December 2023, chapter 5, ‘Hizballah’,

<sup>12</sup> A. Bakir, “Hezbollah’s relationship with Iran”, in I. Fraihat and A. Aljila, eds, *Rebel governance in the Middle East*, 2023, pp151-5 and S. Akbarzadeh, “The Iran-Hizbollah relationship”, in S. Akbarzadeh, ed, *Routledge handbook of international relations in the Middle East*, 2019, pp321-9

- Financial support: in 2023 the US State Department estimated Iranian funding was in the region of “hundreds of millions of dollars annually” and forms most of Hezbollah’s income.<sup>13</sup> The Foundation for Defence of Democracies reports that drug smuggling, donations and “taxation” from the Lebanese diaspora abroad also finance its work.<sup>14</sup>
- Military support: the US State Department reports Iran has supplied “thousands” of rockets, missiles, and small arms.<sup>15</sup>

## Hezbollah’s support for Iran and other armed groups

Across the Middle East, media and analysts report Hezbollah has:

- Intervened in Syria in support of Assad. This is to protect its land route to Iran, in order to acquire arms, and to preserve a non-Sunni ruler in a neighbouring state. An estimated 7,000 to 10,000 Hezbollah fighters are in Syria. Its participation has allowed it to acquire further weaponry.<sup>16</sup>
- Trained Iran-backed Iraqi militias and the Houthis in Yemen.<sup>17</sup>
- Helped direct [Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping](#) in 2024.<sup>18</sup>
- Helped Iran to evade sanctions, including by delivering oil to Assad.<sup>19</sup>
- Reportedly been strengthening its relations with Hamas, based in Gaza. Hezbollah-Hamas relations had been strained in 2012 when Hamas backed the Syrian opposition but were restored in 2017. During the 2023/24 conflict, several Hamas leaders have been based in Lebanon.<sup>20</sup>

The Middle East Institute’s [Hezbollah’s regional activities and Iran’s proxy network](#), 2021, provides more on the regional reach of Hezbollah.

There have been recurrent hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah since the 1980s. Major conflicts include the [34-day conflict in 2006](#), which followed the kidnapping of Israeli soldiers by Hezbollah, and the [2023/24 Israel-Hamas conflict](#), when Hezbollah has daily fired projectiles into Israel.

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<sup>13</sup> US State Department, [Country reports on terrorism 2022](#), December 2023, chapter 5, ‘Hizballah’,

<sup>14</sup> Foundation for Defence of Democracies, [Hezbollah: Financial assessment](#), 2017

<sup>15</sup> US State Department, [Country reports on terrorism 2022: Iran](#), 2023

<sup>16</sup> CSIS, [The escalating conflict with Hezbollah in Syria](#), 20 June 2018

<sup>17</sup> [Hezbollah trains Iraqis in Iran, officials say](#), New York Times, 5 May 2008; Foreign Affairs, [The Houthi Hezbollah](#), 31 March 2016; [Elite Iranian guards training Yemen’s Houthis](#), Reuters, 27 March 2015

<sup>18</sup> [Iranian and Hezbollah commanders help direct Houthi attacks in Yemen](#), Reuters, 21 January 2024

<sup>19</sup> Middle East Institute, [Hezbollah’s regional activities and Iran’s proxy network](#), July 2021, section 6

<sup>20</sup> Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, [Lebanon: new strategic base for Hamas](#), 17 October 2022; [Who were the Hamas officials killed in Beirut?](#), Al-Jazeera, 3 January 2024; Stimson, [Why Syria is so silent about Hamas](#), 19 March 2024

## Situation in 2024

### UN resolutions on Hezbollah disarming have not been implemented

Under UN Security Council Resolutions 1559 (2004) and 1701 (2006), Hezbollah and other non-state armed groups in Lebanon are to disarm and disband, allowing Lebanon's Government to have a monopoly over the use of force.<sup>21</sup>

A report by the UN Secretary General in March 2024 said there had been “no tangible progress” on disarming and disbanding groups such as Hezbollah. The report also said Lebanon's Government had requested support for its armed forces (the UK, among others, provides bilateral support).<sup>22</sup>

Since the 7 October 2023 assault by Hamas against Israel, daily exchanges of fire have been reported between Israeli Defence Forces and Hezbollah. Both sides have warned of a wider conflict, though observers argue that neither side desires one.

Diplomatic efforts have centred on Hezbollah's withdrawal from border areas and the implementation of the UN resolutions. However, Hezbollah has said it will not negotiate until the conflict in Gaza ends.<sup>23</sup>

The Commons Library research briefing, [Israel-Hamas conflict 2023/24: US, UN, EU and regional response](#) has further information on the conflict.

### Hezbollah as a political actor in Lebanon

As described in the Commons Library briefing, [Lebanon: Introductory country profile](#) (February 2023), Lebanon is experiencing a political vacuum, with no president since 2022 and an interim Prime Minister. In alliance with other parties, Hezbollah has blocked candidates considered unfavourable to it, including those who have sought to bring its military under state control.<sup>24</sup>

Primarily on sectarian lines, Lebanese society and politicians continue to be divided over Hezbollah's role.<sup>25</sup> Hezbollah has also not been immune from criticism for Lebanon's struggling economy, which has been described by the World Bank as having experienced one of the world's worst economic crises since 1850.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> UN, [UN Security Council Resolution 1559 \(2004\)](#) and [UN Security Council Resolution 1701 \(2006\)](#)

<sup>22</sup> UN, [Implementation of Security Council resolution 1559 \(2004\)](#) (PDF), 18 April 2024, para 30; [After Qatar's \\$20m aid to army \[...\]](#), Al-Monitor, 2 July 2024, [New British donations to Lebanese army](#), L'Orient Today, 28 March 2024

<sup>23</sup> [Nasrallah says Lebanon front to remain active \[...\]](#), Naharnet, 5 April 2024

<sup>24</sup> Crisis Group, [Limiting the damage of Lebanon's looming presidential vacuum](#), 27 October 2022

<sup>25</sup> Washington Institute, [In the shadow of Hezbollah-Israel escalation \[...\]](#), 8 January 2024

<sup>26</sup> [Lebanon election deals blow to Hezbollah](#), DW, 17 May 2022; Washington Institute, [New poll shows Lebanese frustrations with government, Iran, other powers](#), 22 June 2022; World Bank, [Lebanon sinking into one of the most severe global crises episodes](#), 1 June 2021

However, as noted by the think-tank Chatham House, reforming the Lebanese state and Hezbollah's role will require all parties to address a status quo which keeps many of them in power, and this will be difficult.<sup>27</sup>

### Hezbollah's relationship with Assad in Syria

Iran is a significant ally of Assad. In 2023, Assad re-established diplomatic ties with several Arab Gulf states for the first time since being expelled from the [Arab League](#) in 2011. This potentially allows him to re-balance his relationship with Hezbollah (as well as Iran and Russia, his other backers).

For further analysis, see Carnegie Endowment, [Power points defining the Syria-Hezbollah relationship](#), 2019.

## 1.3

## Syria

### Iran's ties with Syria extend back to the 1980s

The governments of Syria and Iran have been close allies since the 1980s.

Their alliance developed following the [Camp David Accords](#) between Egypt and Israel in 1978, which led to Egypt's isolation in the region and opened opportunities for Iraq, Syria, Iran and Saudi Arabia to compete for regional dominance. Syria-Iran ties developed in shared opposition to Iraq: during the Iran-Iraq war (1980 to 1988), Syria was one of the few major allies of Iran.<sup>28</sup>

Both Syria and Iran also supported Lebanese Shia militias (including Hezbollah) during the Lebanese civil war in the 1980s and following the Israeli intervention in Lebanon in 1982.<sup>29</sup>

Cooperation is despite Syria's Sunni-majority population and Iran's Shia government. Syria's ruler, President Bashar al-Assad, is an Alawite Muslim. Although a separate group, it shares some practices with Shia Muslims.<sup>30</sup>

### Iranian support during Syria's civil war, from 2012

In March 2011, President Assad faced a significant challenge to his rule when anti-government protests broke out in Syria, inspired by a wave of pro-democracy uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa. These events were known as the Arab Spring.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Chatham House, [How Hezbollah holds sway over the Lebanese state](#), 7 July 2021

<sup>28</sup> M. Calculli and M. Legrenzi, "Middle East security: conflict and securitisation of identities", in L. Fawcett, ed, *International relations of the Middle East*, 2016, p227

<sup>29</sup> Brussels International Center, [The Syrian-Iranian nexus](#) (PDF), 2018

<sup>30</sup> [Syrian Alawites distance themselves from Assad](#), BBC News, 3 April 2016

<sup>31</sup> This and next paragraph from Commons Library, [The Syrian civil war: timeline and statistics](#), pp2-6

The Syrian Government rejected a peace plan presented by the Arab League (an organisation of Arab states in North Africa and the Middle East) and which was backed by the UN. The UK, US and others—including those in Arab Gulf—called for Assad to stand down, leaving him isolated from Arab states.

Alongside Russia, Iran has been a significant backer of Assad during the conflict, motivated by retaining a land route for Hezbollah in Lebanon and ensuring a Sunni-led or Saudi or US-aligned Syria did not emerge.<sup>32</sup>

Public information is limited, but Iran's support during the last decade is reported to include:

- Financial support, estimated to be around US\$6 billion a year by one UN official in 2015.<sup>33</sup>
- Supplies of oil, valued to be around US\$10 billion from 2013 to 2018.<sup>34</sup>
- Military training of pro-government militias by the Quds force and providing weapons and other equipment.<sup>35</sup>
- Together with Lebanese Hezbollah, training the Syrian National Defence Force, a group loyal to Assad.<sup>36</sup>

### Militia groups and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in Syria

The below is not an exhaustive list. The Atlantic Council's [Fact box: Iranian influence and presence in Syria](#) (2020) provides a wider survey:

- The IRGC's Quds force has long been deployed to train and advise the military and security forces. As of 2024, IRGC officers remain in Syria.<sup>37</sup>
- Iran mobilised fighters from Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, as well as Syria, to establish armed Shia militias. These include [Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas](#) and [Liwa al-Imam al-Hussein](#) (both from Iraq). Iran-supported militias reportedly total around 20,000 to 30,000 personnel.<sup>38</sup>
- Sunni pro-Assad militias such as [Liwa al-Baqir](#) have also reportedly had direct support and weaponry from the IRGC.<sup>39</sup>
- Lebanese Hezbollah has also been involved in training groups such as [Quwat al-Ridha](#). Analysis for the Washington Institute suggests they may

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<sup>32</sup> Understanding War, [Iranian strategy in Syria](#), 2013

<sup>33</sup> Middle East Monitor, [Iran's ambitious post-war reconstruction in Syria](#), 5 March 2019

<sup>34</sup> Atlantic Council, [Iran's credit line to Syria: A well that never runs dry](#), 10 February 2020

<sup>35</sup> Atlantic Council, [Iran's footprint in Syria](#), 18 September 2013

<sup>36</sup> As above

<sup>37</sup> [Iran's guards pull officers from Syria after Israeli strikes](#), Reuters, 1 February 2024

<sup>38</sup> Washington Institute, [Iran is outpacing Assad for control of Syria's Shia militias](#), 12 April 2018

<sup>39</sup> Washington Institute, [Profile: Liwa al-Baqir](#), 1 November 2023

operate as part of Lebanese Hezbollah rather than as separate entities.<sup>40</sup>

## Iran's position in Syria in 2024

### Stalemated conflict

Pro-Assad forces now control most Syrian territory, with Kurdish forces backed by the United States occupying parts of eastern Syria and Turkish-aligned groups in the north. High-intensity conflict has declined in recent years, though Israel, Turkey, Russia, and the US continue to conduct military operations. There are no substantive peace talks among Syrians.<sup>41</sup>

Analysis for the European Council on Foreign Relations argues that diluting Iranian influence in Syria will be a slow process, and require de-escalation, support for recovery, alignment with Arab Gulf states (see below) and strengthening of formal state institutions.<sup>42</sup>

### Competition from Russia and Arab Gulf states

In Syria, Iran has had to negotiate its relationship with Assad in the context of substantial Russian military support. While Iran and Russia have strong ties, they disagree on Syria's future: Russia hopes to recreate a central state under Assad, while Iran is seeking greater influence for its affiliated militia groups operating alongside state institutions.<sup>43</sup>

The withdrawal of some Russian forces to support its military operations in Ukraine from 2022 have created an opening in Syria for Iran. In 2024, some analysts have identified strengthened Iranian and Hezbollah influence in southern Syria, on the border with Israel.<sup>44</sup>

Iran's ties are further complicated by the rapprochement between Arab Gulf states and Assad. Having been expelled from the Arab League in 2011, Assad was allowed to rejoin in 2023. Re-engagement with states such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates offers a potential economic lifeline to Assad and a challenge to Iranian influence. However, US sanctions against Assad are likely to limit opportunities for economic cooperation.<sup>45</sup>

### Assad's disengagement from Hamas

From 2001 to 2011, the exiled leadership of Hamas was based in Syria. However, Hamas sided with the Syrian opposition, and it relocated abroad. Ties were not resumed until 2022 but Syria has not provided military support to Hamas during the 2023/24 conflict with Israel. Potential reasons for this

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<sup>40</sup> Washington Institute, [Lebanese Hezbollah's Islamic resistance in Syria](#), 26 April 2018

<sup>41</sup> Commons Library, [Syria's civil war in 2023: Assad back in the Arab League](#), June 2023

<sup>42</sup> European Council on Foreign Relations, [Beyond proxies: Iran's deeper strategy in Syria and Lebanon](#), 5 June 2024

<sup>43</sup> Middle East Institute, [Russia, Iran and the competition to shape Syria's future](#), 12 September 2019

<sup>44</sup> Carnegie Endowment, [Why Iranian entrenchment in southern Syria worries \[...\]](#), 21 March 2024

<sup>45</sup> Commons Library, [Syria's civil war in 2023: Assad back in the Arab League](#), 9 June 2023, section 3.4

include continuing distrust, Syria seeking to balance its relations with Arab Gulf states, and the weakness of the Assad government in Syria.<sup>46</sup>

### Pressure on the US position

The United States deploys around 900 personnel, primarily in northeast Syria. Their role is to combat Islamic State through working with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). These forces have come under attack from Iran-aligned militias, including in the 2023/24 Israel-Hamas conflict.<sup>47</sup>

The Biden Administration has not announced plans to withdraw its forces from Syria, despite media reports in early 2024.<sup>48</sup>

### Israeli attacks on Iranian positions in Syria

Iran's presence in Syria enables it to support Hezbollah in Lebanon and project a threat to Israel. To address this, Israel has conducted airstrikes in Syria against Hezbollah and Iranian forces since 2013.<sup>49</sup>

A risk of escalation between Iran and Israel over Syria remains. In April 2024, Iran launched more than 330 drones and missiles against Israel in what it said was retaliation for an attack on its consulate in Syria, in which seven IRGC officers were killed. Israel neither confirmed nor denied the strike.<sup>50</sup>

## 1.4

## Iraq

### Growing Iranian influence since 2003

Since the Iranian revolution of 1979 and Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, Iran has sought to influence Iraqi politics and mobilise support within the Shia Muslim population of Iraq, which constitutes most of its citizenry.

Before the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iran supported Shia political parties and groups such as the [Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq](#) (SCIRI), which were based in exile in Iran (Sunni Muslims largely dominated Iraqi politics before 2003).<sup>51</sup>

Since the removal of Saddam Hussein, Shia political influence has grown, and Iran has established armed militias. With the withdrawal of US forces in 2011

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<sup>46</sup> Stimson, [Why Syria is so silent about Hamas](#), 19 March 2024

<sup>47</sup> Commons Library, [Syria's civil war in 2023: Assad back in the Arab League](#), June 2023, section 2.4; Washington Institute, [Tracking anti-US strikes in Iraq and Syria \[...\]](#), 16 May 2024

<sup>48</sup> [US won't leave Iraq or Syria anytime soon](#), Politico, 24 January 2024

<sup>49</sup> International Crisis Group, [Golan Heights and south/west Syria](#), accessed 8 July 2024

<sup>50</sup> Commons Library, [Israel-Iran 2024: UK and international response](#)

<sup>51</sup> Commons Library, [Iraq in 2022: Forming a government](#), November 2022, sections 1 and 2

and the rise of Islamic State/Daesh in 2014 and loss of territory in Iraq by Iraqi government forces, these groups have been able to expand further.<sup>52</sup>

## What armed groups does Iran support in Iraq?

Armed groups backed by Iran include the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF).

The size of the PMF is disputed and may number between 160,000 and 240,000.<sup>53</sup> It was formed in the wake of Daesh/Islamic State's advances in 2014. The majority are Shia militias, but the PMF also include Sunnis, Christians, and Turkmen. It was legalised by the Iraqi Parliament in 2016, with the aim of supplementing the regular Iraqi armed forces.<sup>54</sup>

However, in 2022 the US State Department says "several" PMF groups "continued to defy central government command".<sup>55</sup> The UK has called for their full integration into the Iraqi military.<sup>56</sup>

Other groups supported by Iran, and which form part of the PMF, include those outlined below. Several accept Iran's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, as their supreme point of authority.<sup>57</sup>

- [Badr Organization](#). Formed in 1982 by Iraqi exiles, it was initially funded and led by IRGC. It has occasionally fought American forces and has representatives in the Iraq parliament.<sup>58</sup>
- [Kata'ib Hezbollah](#), which was founded after 2003. In addition to being in the PMF, it is part of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, an umbrella group of Shia armed groups which have launched attacks on US troops (see below). It also has representatives in the Iraqi parliament.<sup>59</sup>
- [Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq](#): founded in 2006. It has fought in Syria as well as Iraq and participated in parliamentary elections.<sup>60</sup>
- [Harakat al-Nujaba](#): Formed in 2013 to support Assad in Syria.<sup>61</sup>

The US State Department stated in 2022 that Iran provided groups such as Kata'ib Hizballah with weaponry, including "increasingly accurate and lethal

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<sup>52</sup> [Iraq: Growth of the Shia militia](#), BBC News, 17 April 2015; US Institute for Peace, [Pro-Iran militias in Iraq](#), 10 November 2021.

<sup>53</sup> Washington Institute, [Extraordinary PMF expansion](#), 3 June 2023

<sup>54</sup> US Institute for Peace, [Pro-Iran militias in Iraq](#), 2021

<sup>55</sup> US State Department, [Country reports on terrorism 2022](#), December 2023 "Iraq"

<sup>56</sup> PQ 192819 [[Iraq: armed forces](#)], 27 November 2018

<sup>57</sup> List taken from US Institute for Peace, [Pro-Iran militias in Iraq](#), 10 November 2021

<sup>58</sup> Washington Institute, [Profile: Badr organisation](#), 2 September 2021

<sup>59</sup> [Who is Kataib Hezbollah, the group blamed for killing US troops?](#), Reuters, 30 January 2024

<sup>60</sup> Washington Institute, [Profile: Asaib Ahl al-Haq](#), 27 April 2021

<sup>61</sup> Washington Institute, [Who are Nujaba and why did the US just strike them?](#), 4 January 2024

unmanned aerial systems”, and support, funding, and training, which were used to attack US and coalition forces.<sup>62</sup>

## US-Iran-militia attacks in Iraq

The US maintains 2,500 troops in Iraq in an advisory and training role.<sup>63</sup>

Iran-backed militias have launched attacks on US bases in Iraq. Iran and the US cooperated indirectly in the defeat of Islamic State/Daesh in Iraq.<sup>64</sup>

During the 2023/24 Israel Hamas conflict, Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) reported over 120 attacks by Islamic Resistance in Iraq from 7 October 2023 to 4 February 2024 against American bases.<sup>65</sup> In February 2024, following the killing of three US troops at Tower 22 base in Jordan by Keta'ib Hezbollah in Iraq, the US struck 85 targets at seven facilities against Iran-aligned groups in Syria and Iraq.<sup>66</sup>

In 2020, Iran responded to the killing of IRGC General Qasem Soleimani in a US drone strike in Baghdad by launching missile strikes against two airbases that housed US and coalition forces (no personnel were killed).<sup>67</sup> Similar responses have followed attacks on Iran-aligned groups in the region.<sup>68</sup>

## Iran's position in Iraq in 2024

### Iran-affiliated Shia political influence

Iran-backed Shia groups performed poorly in the 2021 Iraqi parliamentary elections: [Al-Fatah](#), affiliated with the PMF, won 17 seats compared to 47 in 2018 (329 seats were up for election in 2024).

However, following the withdrawal of the Shia group led by [Moqtada Al-Sadr](#) from the parliament (an Iraqi nationalist and populist, and leader of the [Mahdi army](#), which attacked US forces and other groups), Al-Fatah and its allies took their seats in parliament. They formed a government in 2022.<sup>69</sup>

Analysts have argued pro-Iran groups have since been solidifying their control of the Iraqi state and influence over the economy.<sup>70</sup> Some have argued

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<sup>62</sup> US State Department, [Country reports on terrorism 2022](#), December 2023, “Iran”

<sup>63</sup> [Where US troops are stationed in the Middle East](#), Axios, 31 October 2023

<sup>64</sup> D. Esfandiary and A. Tabatabai, “Iran’s ISIS policy”, *International Affairs*, vol 91, 2015, pp1-15

<sup>65</sup> ACLED, [US strikes and counter-strikes in the Middle East](#), updated 9 February 2024

<sup>66</sup> [What we know about the US retaliatory strikes in Iraq and Syria](#), BBC News, 3 February 2024

<sup>67</sup> Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, [The Quds force after Suleimani](#), 29 May 2020

<sup>68</sup> [Iranian guards claim ballistic missile attacks in Erbil](#), Al-Jazeera 13 March 2022

<sup>69</sup> Commons Library, [Iraq in 2022: forming a government](#), November 2022, section 3.3

<sup>70</sup> Brookings, [The PMF is turning Iraq into an Iranian client state](#), 2 February 2024; Foreign Affairs, [Iraq is quietly falling apart](#), 5 June 2023; Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, [Iraq's new regime change](#), December 2023

that Iran's ultimate aim is to "Lebanonize" Iraq, meaning local militias wield power within a weak central state, in a similar way to Lebanese Hezbollah.<sup>71</sup>

The next Iraqi parliamentary elections are due in 2025, and reports suggest that Al-Sadr may be considering a return to politics. This is likely to increase the risk of political instability in Iraq. If he wins, he is considered likely to exclude pro-Iran Shias from any coalition government he supports.<sup>72</sup>

### Negotiations on withdrawing US forces

While US combat operations in Iraq have ended, some troops remain in an advisory role. Since 2023, there have been negotiations on potentially withdrawing some troops, and in 2024 pressure from pro-Iran militias in Iraq for their complete withdrawal. The Iraqi Prime Minister has confirmed a timetable for withdrawal is being discussed (note, however, that US withdrawal has been proposed frequently since 2011).<sup>73</sup>

## 1.5

## Yemen and the Red Sea

### Houthi control of northern Yemen and the capital

The Houthis are Zaydi Shias, a minority group in Yemen and the Middle East, and known officially as Ansar Allah. They emerged in northern Yemen in the 1990s, as part of a reaction against Saudi influence over Yemen's Government and also being motivated by a desire to protect Zaydi Shias.<sup>74</sup>

In 2014, they seized control of Yemen's capital, Sana'a, marking the beginning of a multi-sided conflict in Yemen. The Houthis remain in conflict with the internationally recognised Government of Yemen, which has been backed militarily by a Saudi-led coalition since 2015. The Houthis now control much of northern Yemen and the majority of its population.

The Commons Library research briefing, [Yemen in 2023: Conflict and status of peace talks](#), provides more on the conflict, its history, and key actors.

### Iran's growing support for the Houthis

Analysts argue that Iranian support for the Houthis has increased from when the group was first established, and Yemen's civil war began.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Council on Foreign Relations, [Iran-backed militias in Iraq poised to expand \[...\]](#), 13 October 2020

<sup>72</sup> Soufan Center, [Sadrist return might upend Iraqi politics and regional orientation](#), 24 May 2024; [Iraqi Shi'ite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr girds for political comeback](#), Reuters, 12 May 2024

<sup>73</sup> Arab Center Washington, [US troops to stay in Syria and Iraq \[...\]](#), 22 February 2024; [Iraq eyes drawdown of US-led forces starting September, sources say](#), Reuters, 22 July 2024

<sup>74</sup> Wilson Center, [Who are Yemen's Houthis?](#), May 2018 and Washington Institute, [Saudi Arabia's war with the Houthis: Old borders, new lines](#), 9 April 2015

<sup>75</sup> RAND, [Could the Houthis be the next Hizbollah?](#), 13 July 2020

In 2024, the Center for Strategic and International Studies said Iran “only started intervening in a serious way in 2017”, after the Houthis had established themselves in northern Yemen, and the group had not been a “core interest”, as was the case for Hezbollah.<sup>76</sup>

Analysis for the Italian Institute for International Political Studies (IPSI) similarly argues Iran “band wagoned on Houthi successes”. Looking forward, IPSI argues Yemen could be “increasingly used by Iran as a platform for weapons smuggling” to its allies in Gaza and Lebanon.<sup>77</sup>

In 2024, the US Defence Intelligence Agency (part of the US Department of Defense) said that Iranian support for the Houthis included the provision of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs, drones) and a “diverse” range of short- and medium-term missiles, including anti-ship variants and related training.<sup>78</sup>

The US Treasury Department also says Iran and the IRGC has provided several millions of dollars in finance through regional networks.<sup>79</sup>

Reports suggest that in 2024, Iran has also helped to direct Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping.<sup>80</sup> Iran also deployed an intelligence ship to the region.<sup>81</sup>

In 2024, the Houthis also opened an office in Iraq to cooperate with the PMF.<sup>82</sup>

## Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia and UAE

Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain militarily support Yemen’s internationally recognised government, which the Houthis oppose.

The Houthis have launched drone and missile strikes against targets in Saudi Arabia, with the latest occurring in March 2022. They also launched their first attacks against the UAE in January and February 2022. In 2023, the Houthis also killed three Bahraini soldiers on the Saudi border.<sup>83</sup>

## The Houthis in 2024

### Yemen’s ongoing conflict

In April 2022, the first nationwide ceasefire took place in Yemen. It was renewed twice but expired in October 2022. There has been no return to the level of violence seen before the ceasefire.

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<sup>76</sup> CSIS, [A strategic approach to Red Sea security](#), 14 February 2024

<sup>77</sup> IPSI, [Houthis and Iran: A war time alliance](#), 22 March 2023

<sup>78</sup> Defence Intelligence Agency, [Iran: Enabling Houthi attacks across the Middle East](#), February 2024

<sup>79</sup> US Treasury Department, [Treasury targets network financing Houthis \[...\]](#), 7 December 2023

<sup>80</sup> [Iranian and Hezbollah commanders help direct Houthi attacks \[...\]](#), Reuters, 21 January 2024

<sup>81</sup> [US conducted cyberattack on suspected Iranian spy ship](#), NBC, 15 February 2024

<sup>82</sup> [The Yemeni’s Houthis’ headquarters in Iraq](#), BBC Monitoring, 22 July 2024; Sanna Center, [Strategic coordination between the Houthis and Iraqi factions](#), 15 July 2024

<sup>83</sup> Commons Library, [Yemen in 2023: Conflict and status of peace talks](#), pp13-14

Further peace talks have been held, but no agreement has yet been reached. There were hopes that the 2023 restoration of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran (see below, section 3), would enable these talks to advance.<sup>84</sup> However, Houthi attacks in the Red Sea in 2023/24 have complicated the potential for normalisation of relations with the Houthis, given the extension of their attacks outside Yemen.<sup>85</sup>

The UN Special Envoy for Yemen, Hans Grundberg, warned in July 2024 that the regional dimension of the Yemen conflict was being “more pronounced” and there were no signs of de-escalation.<sup>86</sup>

Sections 2.1 and 2.2 of the Commons Library research briefing, Commons Library, [Yemen in 2023: Conflict and status of peace talks](#), provides more on peace negotiations and the challenges negotiators face.

### **Houthi attacks on civilian shipping in the Red Sea in 2023/24**

Beginning in November 2023, the Houthis have been launching attacks against ships it says are linked to Israel, causing shipping to be diverted away from the Red Sea, hindering world trade and freedom of navigation.

The US and UK have conducted joint naval and air strikes against the Houthis. Both the US and the EU have also established maritime coalitions to protect civilian shipping. However, Houthi actions are continuing.

US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, has said achieving a ceasefire in Gaza will create the conditions to end the Houthi attacks.<sup>87</sup> The Commons Library research briefing, [UK and international response to the Houthis in the Red Sea 2024](#) provides more on the Houthi attacks and international response.

### **Attacks on Israel**

During the 2023/24 Israel-Hamas conflict, the Houthis have launched missiles and projectiles targeting Israel. In July 2024, a Houthi attack against Tel Aviv killed one person and injured ten others. In response, the Israeli Defence Forces launched an attack on the Houthi-controlled city of Hodeida.<sup>88</sup>

### **Houthi Red Sea attacks as a distraction from domestic criticism**

Analysts have also argued the Red Sea attacks are an attempt by the Houthis to “distract Yemen’s frustration” from their administration.<sup>89</sup> Signs of

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<sup>84</sup> Middle East Institute, [China and the Saudi-Iran rapprochement: Implications for Yemen](#), 5 April 2023

<sup>85</sup> Sana’a Center, [Red Sea attacks provoke international response](#), 27 December 2023

<sup>86</sup> UN, [Yemen: UN envoy warns of threat of return to ‘full-fledged war’](#), 23 July 2024

<sup>87</sup> US Department of State, [Secretary Antony Blinken at a conversation \[...\] at the Brookings Institute](#), 1 July 2024

<sup>88</sup> Security Council Report, [Briefing under the “threats to international peace \[...\]”](#), 22 July 2024

<sup>89</sup> ACLED, [Why are Yemen’s Houthis attacking ships in the Red Sea?](#), 5 January 2024

increased Houthi repression include sentencing 44 people to death for “collaborating” with the Saudi-led coalition in June 2024.<sup>90</sup>

There is no expectation that the Houthis will be dislodged from Yemen through US/UK military action, which is centred on restoring deterrence.

The internationally recognised government of Yemen is also divided within itself, with it including the separatist Southern Transition Council, which is seeking the restoration of a separate southern Yemen state (as existed before 1990). The final shape of a political settlement in Yemen, including the place of the Houthis, is currently unknown.<sup>91</sup>

## 1.6 Occupied Palestinian Territories

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, Iran's leaders have been opposed to the state of Israel and a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>92</sup>

### Iran's support for Hamas and Islamic Jihad

Iran supports several armed groups in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, including Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Both have frequently launched attacks against Israel.<sup>93</sup> In contrast to the majority of groups Iran supports, Islamic Jihad and Hamas are Sunni Muslims. Both are primarily based in Gaza.

[Islamic Jihad](#) was founded in 1981, while Hamas was established in 1987. Since 2007, [Hamas](#) has had control of Gaza, having won the Palestinian elections of 2006 and expelling [Fatah](#) (the dominant party on the [Palestinian Authority](#), which governs the West Bank) after fighting.<sup>94</sup>

Iranian support has long included weaponry, training, and funding to both groups. In 2019, the US estimated Iran provides US\$100 million annually to various Palestinian terrorist groups.<sup>95</sup>

### Tensions in the relationship

In 2012, Hamas refused to support Syrian President Assad. Iran resultingly reduced its funding, though this has since increased. From 2014, Islamic Jihad also refused to support the Houthis in Yemen, causing Iranian funding to be

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<sup>90</sup> Sana'a Center, [Houthis tighten grip amid Red Sea attacks](#), 9 April 2024; [Yemen's Houthis sentence 44 to death for “collaborating” with Saudi-led coalition](#), Voice of America, 1 June 2024

<sup>91</sup> Fikra Forum, [Political settlement in Yemen: Challenges and future prospects](#), 23 May 2023

<sup>92</sup> [Is Iran shifting its stance against the two-state solution?](#), Amwaj, 6 December 2023 and Khamenei.IR, [Iran's proposal: a referendum for all Palestinian on the land of Palestine](#), 17 February 2020. The referendum would allow only those inhabited the region before the Balfour Declaration (1917) to vote.

<sup>93</sup> US Department of State, [Country reports on terrorism 2022](#), December 2023, 'Iran'

<sup>94</sup> European Council on Foreign Relations, [Hamas and Islamic Jihad](#).

<sup>95</sup> Washington Institute, [Tehran's international targets](#), 13 November 2018

reduced. However, recent years have seen reconciliation as Hamas has restored its ties with Assad and Islamic Jihad backed the Houthis.<sup>96</sup>

These tensions also affected Hezbollah's relationship with Hamas, who have provided military and other training. Hamas has also based members in Lebanon. Hezbollah-Hamas ties declined during the early part of the Syrian civil war, but these began to be restored from 2017.<sup>97</sup>

## 2023/24 Israel-Hamas conflict

On 7 October 2023, Hamas launched an assault against Israel, killing 1,200 people and taking 253 hostages. Islamic Jihad also participated. Iraqi militias, Hezbollah, and the Houthis have conducted attacks in support.<sup>98</sup>

Israel's Government has set three aims: to destroy Hamas, to demilitarize Gaza, and to "deradicalize" Palestinian society (referring to a change in Palestinian leadership and the curriculum taught in schools).<sup>99</sup>

The Commons Library research briefing, [2023/24 Israel-Hamas conflict: UK actions and response](#), provides a summary of events since 7 October.

There is debate on how far Iran was involved in the planning of the assault, though it did voice its support for it.<sup>100</sup> On 8 October, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the US had "not yet seen evidence that Iran directed or was behind this particular attack, but there's certainly a long relationship".<sup>101</sup>

In 2023 and 2024, there have been ongoing reconciliation talks between Hamas and Fatah, with the aim of agreeing a Palestinian unity government.<sup>102</sup> Saudi Arabia has traditionally viewed reconciliation as a means to reduce Iranian influence in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.<sup>103</sup>

## The "shadow war" between Israel and Iran

Iran and Israel have fought what has been described as a "shadow war" or "war between the wars" for decades through attacks on land, sea, air, and cyberspace.<sup>104</sup> The [first direct attack on Israel](#) by Iran occurred in April 2024.

This "shadow war" has included Israeli attacks on Iran-linked sites in Syria, cyberattacks against Iran's nuclear programme, and targeting of IRGC and other leaders. Iran has also conducted attacks on foreign shipping, threatening freedom of navigation.<sup>105</sup> For analysis, see:

<sup>96</sup> European Council on Foreign Relations, [Iran, Hamas and Islamic Jihad](#), 18 December 2023; Foreign Affairs, [Hamas's goal in Gaza](#), 11 December 2023; [Hamas-Iran relationship](#), The Jerusalem Strategic Tribune, November 2023

<sup>104</sup> [Israel is ratcheting up its shadow war with Iran](#), The Economist, 4 April 2024; [Iran and Israel have a long history of clandestine attacks](#), New York Times, 2 April 2024

- International Institute for Strategic Studies, [Iran and Israel: Everything short of war](#), May 2024
- US Institute for Peace, [Iran's confrontation with Israel over four decades](#), October 2023

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<sup>98</sup> Commons Library, [2023/24 Israel-Hamas conflict: US, UN, EU and regional response](#), section 7.2

<sup>99</sup> [Benjamin Netanyahu: Our three prerequisites for peace](#), Wall Street Journal, 25 December 2023

<sup>100</sup> Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, [The path to October 7](#), December 2023

<sup>101</sup> US Department of State, [Secretary Blinken with Dana Bash](#), 8 October 2023

<sup>102</sup> [China says Hamas and Fatah voice will for Palestinian reconciliation](#), 1 May 2024

<sup>103</sup> R. Rieger, Saudi Arabian foreign relations, 2017, pp168-70

<sup>104</sup> [Israel is ratcheting up its shadow war with Iran](#), The Economist, 4 April 2024; [Iran and Israel have a long history of clandestine attacks](#), New York Times, 2 April 2024

<sup>105</sup> US Institute for Peace, [Israel: The Iran threat and options](#), 11 September 2023 and [Timeline: Israeli attacks on Iran](#), 30 January 2023

## 2

# Limiting Iranian influence and power

The UN Security Council, the United States, United Kingdom, European Union, and others, apply sanctions targeting Iran's support for armed groups abroad, the groups themselves, and specific members. They have also designated several as terrorist organisations.

### 2.1

## Diplomatic statements

### United Kingdom

At the UN Security Council (UNSC), in 2024 the government said the UK had “long been clear” that:

Iran plays an unacceptable role in destabilising the region, and that it also bears responsibility for the actions of the groups it has supported militarily, financially, and politically over many years.<sup>106</sup>

At UNSC meetings, the UK has specifically criticized Iran's support for the Houthis, Hezbollah, Hamas, and militias in Iraq and Syria.<sup>107</sup> It has also raised these concerns directly with the Iranian Foreign Ministry.<sup>108</sup>

The UK also says that it expects Iran to adhere to the limits put in place on its nuclear programme by the 2015 nuclear agreement. In June 2024, the UK Government said it would keep “all diplomatic options on the table” to address Iran's nuclear programme and that “we have maintained our compliance [...] [and] Iran must demonstrate the same commitment”.<sup>109</sup>

### United States and the G7

Together with other members of the G7 (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, United States, and the European Union), in June 2024 the UK demanded:

<sup>106</sup> Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), [The UK unequivocally condemns Iran's reckless attack against Israel](#), 15 April 2024

<sup>107</sup> FCDO, [UK calls on Iran to cease unlawful support for Houthis](#), 14 March 2024; FCDO, [The UK is deeply concerned about the potential for escalation \[...\]](#), 2 April 2024

<sup>108</sup> FCDO, [Foreign Secretary's call with Iranian Foreign Minister \[...\]](#), 3 November 2023; FCDO, [Foreign Secretary's meeting with the Foreign Minister of Iran](#), 17 January 2024

<sup>109</sup> FCDO, [Iran must live up to its commitments under JCPOA](#), 24 June 2024

... that Iran cease its malicious activities and destabilizing actions in the Middle East and [said] we stand ready to adopt further sanctions or take other measures in response to further destabilizing initiatives.<sup>110</sup>

In a meeting of G7 Foreign Ministers in April 2024, governments condemned the Iranian attack on Israel earlier in the month and called on Iran to end its support for armed groups and for them to also stop their attacks. They said they were collectively committed to Iran never acquiring a nuclear weapon.<sup>111</sup>

## 2.2

## Designation of terrorist groups

The below table summarises which armed groups the US, EU and UK has designated as terrorist organisations. It is not exhaustive. The impact of designation differs between these three, as explained below.

Where possible, hyperlinks are to the original announcement of proscription.

Note that proscription/designation is not necessary to apply sanctions against a group or individuals. Specific UK sanctions are set out in section 2.3.

### United States

The US has two types of terrorist designation, with different consequences:

- Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTO): Designated when the group is assessed to engage in terrorist activity that threatens US nationals or interests. It is unlawful for any US national to provide material support to the group, any assets must be frozen and reported to the US Department of the Treasury, and members are removable from the United States.<sup>112</sup>
- Specifically designated global terrorist (SDGT) group: Designation for groups judged to be engaged in terrorism that threaten US nationals or interests. SDGT designation blocks any assets that come within US jurisdiction, and prohibits goods, services, or funds by US nationals.<sup>113</sup>

### European Union

The EU adopted restrictive measures against terrorists in 2001. Terrorists are subject to the freezing of funds and a ban on receiving funds and assets.<sup>114</sup>

### United Kingdom

The Home Secretary can proscribe organisations believed to be “concerned in terrorism” under the [Terrorism Act 2000](#).

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<sup>110</sup> White House, [G7 Apulia Leader's communiqué](#), 14 June 2024

<sup>111</sup> FCDO, [G7 Foreign Minister's communiqué: situation in the Middle East](#), 19 April 2024

<sup>112</sup> US Department of State, [Designated FTP](#), accessed 9 July 2024

<sup>113</sup> US Embassy in the UK, [Terrorism designation FAQs](#), 10 July 2012

<sup>114</sup> European Council, [Sanctions against terrorism](#), accessed 9 July 2024

Proscription offenses include belonging to the group, arranging a meeting in support, addressing a meeting, and wearing clothing or displaying articles in public in support. The UK can also impose financial sanctions against proscribed groups (though proscription is not necessary to apply sanctions).<sup>115</sup>

The UK Government does not routinely comment on proscription decisions and keeps the list of proscribed organisations under review.<sup>116</sup>

Designation of Iran-supported armed groups as terrorists			
Armed group name	United States	United Kingdom	European Union
<b>Bahrain</b>			
Al-Ashtar Brigade	FTO ( <a href="#">2018</a> )	Proscribed ( <a href="#">2017</a> )	No
Saraya al- Mukhtar	SDGT ( <a href="#">2020</a> )	Proscribed ( <a href="#">2017</a> )	No
<b>Iran</b>			
IRGC	FTO ( <a href="#">2019</a> )	No (see section 2.4)	No (see section 2.4)
<b>Iraq</b>			
Kata'ib Hizballah	FTO ( <a href="#">2009</a> )	No	No
Harakat al-Nujaba	SDGT ( <a href="#">2019</a> )	No	No
Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq	FTO ( <a href="#">2020</a> )	No	No
<b>Lebanon</b>			
Hezbollah	FTO ( <a href="#">1997</a> )	Proscribed (in full from <a href="#">2019</a> , part from 2001)	Designated ( <a href="#">2013</a> , military wing only)
<b>Occupied Palestinian Territories</b>			
Hamas	FTO ( <a href="#">1999</a> )	Proscribed (in full from <a href="#">2021</a> , part from 2001)	Designated (first in <a href="#">2003</a> )
Palestinian Islamic Jihad	FTO ( <a href="#">1997</a> )	Proscribed ( <a href="#">2001</a> )	<a href="#">Designated</a>
Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command	FTO ( <a href="#">1997</a> )	Proscribed ( <a href="#">2014</a> )	<a href="#">Designated</a>
<b>Yemen</b>			
Houthis (Ansarallah)	SDGT ( <a href="#">2024</a> )	No	No

Sources: US Department of State, [Foreign Terrorist Organizations](#); UK Home Office, [Proscribed terrorist groups or organisations](#), updated 26 April 2024; European Council, [Sanctions against terrorism](#), All accessed 9 July 2024.

<sup>115</sup> Commons Library research briefing, [Proscribed terrorist organisations](#)

<sup>116</sup> PQ 1744 [[IRGC](#)], 30 March 2023

## 2.3

# UK sanctions of Iran-supported groups

The UK applies sanctions against a range of Iranian organisations and individuals and Iran-supported groups and individuals. These sanctions enable asset freezes and travel bans.

The UK also applies separate [sanctions against Iran's nuclear programme](#) and targeting its [support for Russia](#) in the Ukraine conflict.

## New sanctions regime against Iran

In December 2023, a [new UK sanctions regime against Iran](#) came into force. The legislation expanded the criteria under which entities and individuals linked to Iran can be sanctioned. These include:

- Iran's undermining of peace and stability in the Middle East.
- The use and spread of weapons and technologies from Iran.
- Hostile threats towards the UK and its partners emanating from Iran.<sup>117</sup>

The first designations under the new regime were made in December, and its targets included IRGC members.<sup>118</sup>

The government applies more than 400 sanctions against Iran. This includes the entirety of the IRGC, and senior IRGC and Basij leaders.<sup>119</sup>

## Groups sanctioned by the UK

The below lists a selection of organisations sanctioned by the UK. It does not include individuals sanctioned. A full list can be searched via the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, [Search the UK sanctions list](#):

- Iran: The IRGC, IRGC Aerospace Force, IRGC Missile Command, IRGC Navy, IRGC Qods (Palestine branch) and IRGC Qods Force.
- Lebanon: Hezbollah.
- Occupied Palestinian Territories: Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine) (General Command).
- Yemen: The Houthis.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> FCDO, [New Iranian sanctions regime comes into force](#), 14 December 2023

<sup>118</sup> As above

<sup>119</sup> FCDO, [UK and US step up action to tackle domestic threat from Iran](#), 29 January 2024

<sup>120</sup> FCDO, [Search the UK sanctions list](#), accessed 9 July 2024

## 2.4

## UK debate on proscribing the IRGC

**What is proscription?**

There has been a long-standing debate in the UK over whether to proscribe the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organisation under the [Terrorism Act 2000](#).

Proscription would put the IRGC on the same standing as Hezbollah and Hamas, two groups supported by Iran. Proscription creates offences such as being a member or encouraging support for the organisation and allows sanctions to be applied against it (though sanctions are already applied in the case of the IRGC, see section above).

Proscription is a decision for the Home Secretary, if they judge an organisation meets the criteria under the Act. These include the threat of actions involving serious violence against a person or property or creating a serious risk to the health and safety of the public or a section of the public (this is not an exhaustive list of the criteria).

For an explanation of the Act and the criteria, see the Commons Library research briefing [Proscribed terrorist organisations](#).

**US, Canada and European Union position on the IRGC**

The Trump Administration designated the IRGC a foreign terrorist organisation in 2019 (the US had previously designated the Qods force as an FTO). The Biden Administration has retained the designation.<sup>121</sup> Iran responded by designating the US Central Command and all troops in the Middle East as terrorists.<sup>122</sup>

The European Union applies sanctions against the IRGC and many of its individual members but does not proscribe it as a terrorist organisation. In April 2024, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Josep Borell, said some EU states had raised the possibility of designating the IRGC as a terrorist group. He said this would first require the decision of an EU court.<sup>123</sup> In May 2024, the EU also expanded its sanctions regime against Iran to specifically target its actions in the Middle East.<sup>124</sup>

In June 2024, Canada listed the IRGC as a terrorist group, saying it would “send a strong message” and allow Canada to use “all its tools” to address the terrorist activity of the IRGC (the Qods force had been designated since 2012).<sup>125</sup>

<sup>121</sup> Congressional Research Service, [US sanctions on Iran](#), February 2022, p6; Commons Library research briefing, [UK and international response to the Houthis in the Red Sea 2024](#), section 6.3

<sup>122</sup> [Iran designates as terrorists all US troops in the Middle East](#), Reuters, 30 April 2019

<sup>123</sup> [EU plans sanctions, urges calm after Iran strikes Israel](#), DW, 18 April 2024

<sup>124</sup> European Council, [EU sanctions against Iran](#)

<sup>125</sup> Canadian Government, [Lists the IRGC as a terrorist entity](#), 19 June 2024

Canada and Iran have not had diplomatic relations since 2011. The Iranian government criticised the “hostile” act.<sup>126</sup>

## Iran's actions in the UK

In the UK, the IRGC has been linked to kidnap and assassination plots. In February 2023, UK counter-terrorism police said there had been 15 such plots by Iran since 2020.<sup>127</sup> These included threats to journalists and attempts to collect intelligence on UK-based individuals linked to Iran or Israel.<sup>128</sup> In January 2024, the Charity Commission also launched an investigation of antisemitic speeches by members of the IRGC, given to students in the UK.<sup>129</sup>

## What arguments have been put in favour of proscription?

### The IRGC meets the definition of terrorism and it would send a message

2023 research for the Tony Blair Institute think tank argues that the group meets the criteria for proscription under the Terrorism Act 2000 and that proscribing the IRGC would “send a clear message” that Iranian activity in the UK “will not be tolerated”.<sup>130</sup>

Analysis for the Washington Institute think tank notes the practical effects of the US decision to designate the IRGC a foreign terrorist group in 2019 were limited in the context of wider sanctions already been applied, but also argued it sent, and continues to send, an important message to Iran about its actions both abroad and at home.<sup>131</sup>

### Logical extension of existing sanctions

Previously, in 2020, the Commons Foreign Affairs Committee argued proscribing the IRGC was “a logical extension of the existing restrictions placed” on IRGC members.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> [Iran summons Italy envoy over Canada sanctions](#), Al-Arabiya News, 19 June 2024

<sup>127</sup> [Hostile-state threat probes grown fourfold—police](#), BBC News, 16 February 2023

<sup>128</sup> HC Deb, [20 February 2023](#), c49

<sup>129</sup> [UK officials probe Iran generals' antisemitic talks to students](#), BBC News, 22 January 2024

<sup>130</sup> Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, [Making the case for the UK to proscribe Iran's IRGC](#), 17 January 2023

<sup>131</sup> Washington Institute, [What will IRGC designation actually do?](#), 8 April 2019 and [Don't drop Iran's revolutionary guards from FTO list](#), 21 March 2022

<sup>132</sup> Foreign Affairs Committee, [No prosperity without justice: The UK's relationship with Iran](#), HC 415, 2020, para 50

## It is in the UK's national interest as the IRGC supports other proscribed groups

In September 2023, the UK's Commissioner for Countering Extremism, Robin Simcox, argued it was in the "national interest" to proscribe the IRGC as it supports proscribed groups around the world and it currently remains legal to be hosted in UK institutions.<sup>133</sup>

## What arguments have been put cautioning against proscription?

### The UK already sanctions the entirety of the IRGC

The IRGC is currently sanctioned in its entirety by the UK Government. These sanctions apply asset freezes and other financial measures against the IRGC and individual members.<sup>134</sup>

### Proscription may threaten diplomatic relations with Iran

The Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the 2019-24 parliament, Alicia Kearns, supported proscription. However, in January 2024 she warned "Iran will see it as an act of war [...] [and] we will likely have to close our embassy".<sup>135</sup>

Iran's former Foreign Minister, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, has previously said labelling the IRGC as a terrorist organisation would be interpreted by Iran as a "serious escalation".<sup>136</sup>

In 2022, the UK Government said retaining diplomatic relations with Iran is important to allow the UK to address issues such as human rights, UK security, consular cases, and Iran's role in the region.<sup>137</sup>

### It would risk "upsetting" the definition of terrorism in the UK

In January 2023, the Independent newspaper cited an assessment by the UK's Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, Jonathan Hall, that advised proscribing the IRGC, as a state entity of Iran, under the Terrorism Act would be "at the risk of upsetting the settled meaning of terrorism in domestic law" which had, to date, excluded the armed forces of nation-states.<sup>138</sup>

He reiterated this position in September 2023, arguing that "proscription is saying that these groups shouldn't exist at all [...] no one is saying that Iran

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<sup>133</sup> RUSI, [Countering extremist threats in the UK: An address by Robin Simcox](#), 19 October 2023

<sup>134</sup> HM Treasury, [Financial sanctions, Iran relating to nuclear weapons](#), updated 14 December 2023

<sup>135</sup> HC Deb, [24 January 2024](#), c361

<sup>136</sup> [Terrorist' designation for Iran's IRGC would harm EU security](#), Al-Jazeera, 23 January 2023

<sup>137</sup> PQ 83808 [[Iran: Diplomatic relations](#)], 16 November 2022

<sup>138</sup> [Declaring Iran's IRGC a terrorist group would destabilise UK's definition of terrorism \[...\]](#), The Independent, 11 January 2024; Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, [IRGC](#), 11 January 2023

should not have a security department, we just need to change its behaviour”.<sup>139</sup>

## What is the position of UK parliamentarians?

In January 2023 and February 2024, the House of Commons debated, and agreed to, motions on Iran which included a request for the government to proscribe the IRGC.<sup>140</sup>

Members from across the House of Commons have called for the proscription of the IRGC (see below for Labour's position):

- In 2024, the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Alicia Kearns, said the group should be proscribed.<sup>141</sup>
- In 2024, the former Home Secretary, Suella Braverman, argued the IRGC should be proscribed.<sup>142</sup>
- In 2023, the SNP Foreign Affairs spokesperson, Brendon O'Hara, and the Leader of the Liberal Democrats, Sir Ed Davey, also backed the move.<sup>143</sup>

## What has been the UK Government's position?

In January 2023, both the Telegraph newspaper and the BBC reported that the UK Government was preparing to designate the IRGC a terrorist organisation.<sup>144</sup> However, no change in policy was announced.

In February 2023, then Minister for Security, Tom Tugendhat, cited the potential for an international agreement on proscribing the group:

It is interesting to note that, of the so-called E3+3 [UK, US, China, France, Germany and Russia], Germany and France appear to be looking at proscribing the IRGC, as the United States has already done. It seems that not only is there international agreement on the point the hon. Member [Virendra Sharma] raises, but that action is absolutely ready to go.<sup>145</sup>

However, neither France, Germany, nor the European Union since announced plans to proscribe the IRGC.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> [Iran guards 'shouldn't be treated as a terror group'](#), The Times, 20 September 2023

<sup>140</sup> HC Deb, [12 January 2023](#), c772; HC Deb, [1 February 2024](#), c1094

<sup>141</sup> HC Deb, [24 January 2024](#), c361

<sup>142</sup> HC Deb, [16 October 2023](#), c37, HC Deb, [16 April 2024](#), c30

<sup>143</sup> HC Deb, [6 July 2023](#), c1001; HC Deb, [16 October 2023](#), c28

<sup>144</sup> [Iran's Islamic revolutionary guards set to be proscribed as terror group](#), The Telegraph, 2 January 2023; [Iran's revolutionary guards set to be labelled as terrorist group by UK](#), BBC News, 3 January 2023; White House, [Statement from the President of the designation of the IRGC as foreign terrorist organisation](#), 8 April 2019

<sup>145</sup> HC Deb, [6 February 2023](#), c638

<sup>146</sup> Verfassungsblog, [Why declaring the IRGC a terrorist group is trickier business \[...\]](#), 2 February 2023

In July 2023, when announcing the new sanctions regime against Iran, the former Foreign Secretary James Cleverly also expressed caution on proscription. He said he recognises some see this as the “desired outcome”:

without necessarily understanding that much of what they suspect they want to see [as] [...] the outcome of proscription is actually already in place, such as asset freezes and travel bans [under the sanctions regime].<sup>147</sup>

In November 2023, the government also emphasised new powers under the [National Security Act 2023](#) and the existing sanctions regime for Iran:

The National Security Act will provide another significant toolkit in the fight against individuals working for state entities such as the IRGC; it criminalises a wide range of hostile activities conducted by, for or on behalf of foreign powers. Materially assisting a foreign intelligence service in any activity in or related to the UK will be a crime.

We continue to make use of any and every opportunity to call out Iran’s malign activity [...].<sup>148</sup>

In December 2023, then Foreign Secretary Lord Cameron restated the Government’s position, saying proscribing the IRGC was “not something that either the intelligence agencies or the police are calling for”.<sup>149</sup>

In response to the Iranian attack on Israel in April 2024, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said on proscription that the UK has strengthened its sanctions regime:

[...] we have already sanctioned over 400 Iranian individuals, including the IRGC in its entirety. We put in place at the end of last year a new sanctions regime that gives us more extensive powers to designate sanctions, and of course, the National Security Act 2023 created new offences for espionage and foreign interference, and means that our security services have the powers that they need to deter, disrupt and detect threats of a more modern nature from states such as Iran. [...]

[...] I am confident that the police, security services and courts all have the tools they need to sanction, prosecute and mitigate the threats from Iran. We strengthened our sanctions regime recently, including sanctioning the IRGC in its entirety.<sup>150</sup>

## Position of Foreign Secretary, David Lammy

In January 2023 then-Shadow Foreign Secretary, David Lammy, said Labour would support proscription, “either by using existing terrorism legislation or by creating a new process of proscription for hostile state actors”.<sup>151</sup>

The 2024 Labour party manifesto said that the UK “lacked a comprehensive framework to protect” the UK from the actions of hostile states and groups. It

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<sup>147</sup> HC Deb, [6 July 2023](#), c1001

<sup>148</sup> HL Deb, [29 November 2023](#), cc1082-3

<sup>149</sup> [David Cameron: when Rishi asked me to do this job. \[...\]](#), The Telegraph, 23 December 2023

<sup>150</sup> HC Deb, [16 April 2024](#), cc26 and 30

<sup>151</sup> HC Deb, [31 January 2023](#), c186

cited examples of the [Skripal poisonings](#) in Salisbury and actions of the [IRGC](#). Labour said it would “take the approach used for dealing with non-state terrorism and adapt it to deal with state-based domestic security threats”.<sup>152</sup>

On taking office in July 2024, Mr Lammy said he “stood by” his comments when in opposition and would, over the coming months, review terrorist activity and state threats with the Home Secretary.<sup>153</sup>

### Further reading on the UK's relationship with Iran

- Sanam Vakil, “Iran” in C Phillips and M Stephens, eds, *What next for Britain in the Middle East?*, 2022
- RUSI, [Shifting stands: The UK's role in a changing Gulf](#), 2023.
- British Foreign Policy Group, [The future of UK foreign policy on Iran](#), 2023
- Policy Exchange, [The Iran question and British strategy](#), 2023
- Policy Exchange, [Tehran calling: the Iranian threat of the UK](#), 2024
- Chatham House, [The next UK Government should make conflict resolution the centrepiece of its Middle East and North Africa policy](#), 2024

## 2.5

### Arms embargoes

UN [arms embargoes](#) remain in place against several of Iran's affiliated groups.<sup>154</sup> The United States, European Union and UK also employ arms embargoes against Iran exporting or importing missiles and arms.

### UN arms embargoes against Iran have expired

The 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran intends to restrict Iran's nuclear programme in exchange for sanctions relief. Under its terms, two restrictions on Iranian arms have now expired:

- UN arms embargo, in 2020. This banned Iran from importing conventional weapons and any state from exporting most conventional weapons to Iran. In August 2020, China and Russia vetoed a US-proposed extension at the UN Security Council, while the UK and all other members except two abstained.<sup>155</sup> The UK supported an extension but

<sup>152</sup> [Labour Party Manifesto 2024](#), p15

<sup>153</sup> HC Deb, [19 July 2024](#), c304

<sup>154</sup> This is not the case in Syria, where Russia has backed Assad at the UN Security Council. But see Carter Center, [US and European sanctions on Syria](#) (PDF), 2020

<sup>155</sup> [UN Security Council votes not to extend arms embargo against Iran](#), CBS News, 14 August 2020

said it abstained as “it was clear that it would not attract the support” of the council.<sup>156</sup>

- Missiles and drones, in October 2023. This prohibited Iran from exporting or importing certain missiles, drones, and related technologies without the permission of the UN Security Council. Russia has said it would not observe the resolution; the UK and others have judged Russia to have broken the resolution by importing Iranian drones since 2022.<sup>157</sup>

### The EU, UK and US have continued these arms embargoes

While the UN measures have expired, individual states, including the UK, US and European Union, have continued the measures:

- Conventional arms embargo: From October 2020, all three continued an arms embargo against Iran, as well against the proliferation of weapons to armed and terrorist groups it supports in Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen.<sup>158</sup>
- Missiles and drones: The UK, EU and the United States announced they would continue these sanctions in domestic law from October 2023.<sup>159</sup> This includes sanctions targeting their export to Russia for use in Ukraine. A total of 47 states, including Argentina, Bahrain, and Japan, also signed a statement committing to “take steps to counter Iran’s destabilizing ballistic missile-related activities” when the UN sanctions expired.<sup>160</sup>

### US and UK statements on snapback measures, April 2024

Under the terms of the 2015 nuclear agreement (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA), all previous UN sanctions related to Iran’s nuclear programme, including the embargo on conventional arms transfers and the restrictions on missile and drone technologies, can be re-imposed in the event of “significant non-performance by Iran of JCPOA commitments” (the ‘snapback’ provisions). This provision remains in place until the tenth anniversary of the agreement (“termination day”), in October 2025.<sup>161</sup>

In April 2024, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said the government was committed to “using all diplomatic tools to ensure that Iran never develops a nuclear weapon”. He said this included using the snapback mechanism.<sup>162</sup>

The US Administration says snapback “remains in place and it is an available option” but would not “preview [its] actions”.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> PQ HL8919 [[Iran: Arms trade](#)], 22 October 2020

<sup>157</sup> IISS, [Experts on the expiry of UN limitations on Iran’s missile exports](#), 24 October 2023

<sup>158</sup> Commons Library, [Israel-Iran April 2024](#), section 3

<sup>159</sup> FCDO, [UK to bring UN sanctions on Iran into UK law](#), 14 September 2023; FCDO, [UN Security Council resolution 2231 transition day: Joint statement](#), 18 October 2023

<sup>160</sup> US State Department, [Joint statement on UNSC Resolution 2231 transition day](#), 18 October 2023

<sup>161</sup> EU External Action, [JCPOA](#), 18 August 2021; US State Department, [JCPOA](#), July 2015, Annex 5

<sup>162</sup> HC Deb, [15 April 2024](#), c27

<sup>163</sup> US State Department, [Press briefing-17 April 2024](#)

## Arms embargo against Hezbollah

UNSC 1701 (2006) called on Israel and Lebanon to ensure that there is no delivery of weapons to Lebanese Hezbollah.<sup>164</sup> The UK says the resolution has not been fully implemented and Iran continues to supply weapons.<sup>165</sup>

## Arms embargo against Iraqi militias

UNSC 1546 (2004) calls on member states to prevent the transition of terrorists to and from Iraq, the provision of arms for such groups, and financing that supports them.<sup>166</sup> This includes Iraqi militias.<sup>167</sup>

## Arms embargo against the Houthis in Yemen

UNSC 2216 (2015) says that all UN member states should take measures to prevent the direct or indirect supply, sale, or transfer to, of arms, military equipment and other financial and military assistance, to the Houthis.<sup>168</sup>

In 2021, the UN panel of experts on Yemen said there was an “increasing body of evidence” of Iranian supply of weapons and equipment to the Houthis.<sup>169</sup>

## United States sanctions against Iran

The United States has imposed an extensive sanctions regime against Iran since the overthrow of the last Shah and the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979. As set out in the US Congressional research service (CRS) briefing on [Iran sanctions](#), American sanctions:

- Ban most US trade and investment with Iran (except food and agricultural commodities, medicine, and humanitarian-related goods).
- Prohibit foreign assistance (aside from humanitarian aid) and the trade of arms and other military goods to and from Iran.
- Target Iran’s nuclear programme, drones, and ballistic missiles.<sup>170</sup>

Many elements of Iran’s Government, including the supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, and the IRGC, are also subject to US sanctions. The US also imposes sanctions on human rights grounds and because of Iran’s support for armed and terrorist groups abroad.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> [UNSC Resolution 1701 \(2006\)](#), para 8

<sup>165</sup> PQ 186340 [[Iran: sanctions](#)], 1 June 2023

<sup>166</sup> [UNSC 1546 \(2004\)](#), para 17

<sup>167</sup> PQ 38471 [[Iran: terrorism](#)], 9 September 2021

<sup>168</sup> [UNSC Resolution 2216 \(2015\)](#), para 14

<sup>169</sup> UNSC, [Final report of the panel of experts on Yemen](#), 25 January 2021

<sup>170</sup> CRS, [US sanctions on Iran](#) (PDF), 2023 [3pp] and CRS, [US sanctions on Iran](#), 2022, Annex A [99-pp]

<sup>171</sup> As above

## 3

## Iran's foreign policy in 2024

## 3.1

## Will a new nuclear agreement be reached?

**Further reading on Iran's nuclear programme and talks**

- Commons Library research briefing, [What is the status of the Iran nuclear deal?](#), April 2024
- Royal United Services Institute, [The limited options for managing the Iranian nuclear question](#), July 2024
- European Council on Foreign Relations, [Managed reform: What Iran's new president means for European diplomacy](#), 10 July 2024

**United States withdrawal in 2018**

In 2018 the United States withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), arguing it had failed to curtail Iran. This was despite Iran's verified compliance. The Trump Administration adopted a policy it termed "maximum pressure" against Iran, centred on applying more sanctions against Iran's economy to pressurise it to accept more restrictions.<sup>172</sup>

The following year, Iran began exceeding the agreed-upon limits on its use of uranium.<sup>173</sup> As of June 2024, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reports that Iran's stockpile of enriched uranium continues to increase, and that the monitoring agency had "lost continuity of knowledge" over aspects of Iran's nuclear programmes.<sup>174</sup>

Iran says its programme is for civilian purposes. However, analysts suggest Iran has significantly expanded its uranium enrichment beyond that needed for civilian purposes.<sup>175</sup>

<sup>172</sup> US Institute for Peace, [Trump's maximum pressure targets](#), 3 March 2021; Crisis Group, [The failure of "maximum pressure" against Iran](#), 8 March 2021

<sup>173</sup> Council on Foreign Relations, [What is the Iran nuclear deal?](#), updated 27 October 2023

<sup>174</sup> IAEA, [Director General's introductory statement to the Board of Governors](#), 3 June 2024

<sup>175</sup> IISS, [Mitigating the risks of an unconstrained Iranian nuclear programme](#), 31 March 2023

## Talks to restore the agreement stalled in 2022

During the early part of 2022, talks on restoring the nuclear agreement with Iran were reported to be making good progress. However, they had reached a stalemate by September 2022.<sup>176</sup> Tensions included the below:

- In March 2022 Iran said the United States had made “unacceptable proposals” on curtailing Iran’s wider activity in the region.<sup>177</sup>
- In March 2022, the EU foreign policy representative, Josep Borrell, also said talks would be paused due to “external factors.” This was likely to be a reference to Russian demands that its trade with Iran would not be affected by sanctions imposed against it by Western countries in response to its actions in Ukraine.<sup>178</sup> On 15 March, it was reported that Russia had withdrawn its demand for a wider exemption, partly in response to Iranian diplomatic efforts.<sup>179</sup>
- In summer 2022, the US reported Iran began to make new requests that were “unrealistic” or unrelated to the talks.<sup>180</sup> These may have included Iran’s seeking the IRGC’s removal from the US foreign terrorist list.<sup>181</sup>
- From September 2022, Iran’s response to the protests that followed the [death of Mahsa Amini](#) further complicated talks.<sup>182</sup>
- Iran’s support for Russia in Ukraine, such as through the provision of drones and unmanned aerial vehicles, has increased. Russia has also supported Iran at the IAEA and criticised the use of sanctions against Iran’s drone and missile programmes.<sup>183</sup>

While talks have stalled, neither Iran nor the US have said they have failed.<sup>184</sup> Some indirect talks were held in 2023.<sup>185</sup>

The United Kingdom, United States and European Union all say that while an agreement is not on the table, they are committed to Iran never acquiring a nuclear weapon.<sup>186</sup>

China and Russia, who also signed the original 2015 nuclear agreement, say they continue to be “strong supporters” of the JCPOA and in June 2024 said

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<sup>176</sup> Arms Control Association, [Timeline of nuclear diplomacy with Iran, 1967-2023](#)

<sup>177</sup> [Iran pressures US over nuclear talks delay](#), Al-Jazeera, 10 March 2022.

<sup>178</sup> [External factors force pause in Iran nuclear talks, EU says](#), Reuters, 11 March 2022

<sup>179</sup> [Iran nuclear talks overcome Russian wrench in gears](#), Al-Monitor, 15 March 2022

<sup>180</sup> [A US special envoy responds to Iran’s nuclear talks](#), NPR, 7 October 2022

<sup>181</sup> [Biden made final decision to keep Iran’s IRGC on terrorist list](#), Politico, 24 May 2022

<sup>182</sup> Middle East Institute, [Iran protests and US policy on Tehran’s nuclear programme](#), January 2023

<sup>183</sup> [IAEA board passes resolution against Iran \[...\]](#), Reuters, 5 June 2024; [Russia says it need no longer obey UN restriction on missile technology from Iran](#), Reuters, 17 October 2023

<sup>184</sup> [Iran deal becomes latest casualty of Russia’s war in Ukraine](#), Al-Monitor, 4 January 2023

<sup>185</sup> [Iran has talks with EU’s Mora amid efforts to save nuclear pact](#), Reuters, 21 June 2023

<sup>186</sup> US Department of State, [Secretary Antony Blinken and UK foreign Secretary James Cleverly at a joint press availability](#), 17 January 2023 and HC Deb, [14 March 2023](#), c687

that they stood ready to agree a proposed text from August 2022. Together with Iran, they accused Western countries of “escalat[ion]” against Iran.<sup>187</sup>

## New Iranian president, July 2024

In July 2024, Masoud Pezeshkian [was elected Iranian president](#), defeating a hardline conservative opponent who rejected engagement with the United States and its partners. Mr Pezeshkian has the support of Iran’s former foreign minister, who helped negotiate the 2015 nuclear deal.<sup>188</sup>

In the campaign, Mr Pezeshkian said he considered sanctions a “serious detriment” to Iran and that his foreign policy aims are to “normalise relations with the world” and the implementation of the JCPOA.<sup>189</sup>

However, Iran’s Supreme Leader, who controls the IRGC and largely directs Iranian foreign policy, publicly criticised engagement with the United States (though he did also permit the 2015 agreement).<sup>190</sup>

Foreign policy analysts argue there is a “narrow window” to restore the nuclear agreement and advise a “testing of the waters”. However, they note progress on talks is unlikely to occur until after the US elections, and a Trump Administration is unlikely to restore an agreement it left in 2018.<sup>191</sup>

Following Mr Pezeshkian’s election, in July the US State Department said that it had “no expectations” he would change the direction of Iranian foreign policy, as the supreme leader’s control would continue.

The department reiterated its view that diplomacy remained the “most effective way” to address the nuclear programme but that Iranian actions in the Middle East in 2023/24 meant the topic was “far from any meaningful diplomatic resolution right now”.<sup>192</sup>

## Would any new agreement curtail Iran’s activities in the region?

The 2015 agreement did not include measures on Iranian foreign policy.

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<sup>187</sup> Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [Joint statement, Vienna](#), 4 June 2024

<sup>188</sup> [Zarif makes bold entrance into Iran’s presidential campaign](#), Iran International, 18 June 2024; [Iran president eyes nuclear-deal power broker \[...\]](#), Bloomberg, 10 July 2024

<sup>189</sup> US Institute for Peace, [Pezeshkian: on the issues](#), 8 July 2024

<sup>190</sup> [What to expect from Iran’s new president](#), BBC News, 9 July 2024

<sup>191</sup> CSIS, [Can Iran’s new president change the regime’s confrontational foreign policy?](#), 9 July 2024; [After Pezeshkian win, Iran nuclear diplomacy hinges on US election](#), Al-Monitor, 10 July 2023

<sup>192</sup> US Department of State, [Department press briefing](#), 8 July 2024

The Gulf Cooperation Council, constituted of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman and Qatar, have called for the deal, if re-established, to be widened, in order to address its concerns over Iran's regional activities.<sup>193</sup>

Saudi Arabia previously opposed the 2015 agreement, arguing the lifting of sanctions allowed Iran to expand other activities that threaten Saudi power, such as its support for armed groups.<sup>194</sup> However, in 2022 the Saudi Foreign Minister said that a flawed deal would be better than no agreement.<sup>195</sup>

In 2020, the Commons Foreign Affairs Committee also argued that the UK “must learn the lessons” of the deal and look towards a broader agreement which addresses regional security, including Iran's missile programme.<sup>196</sup>

In 2022 Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, said that matters of “national strength”—such as the country's wider military capabilities and links to armed groups abroad—were not a matter for negotiation.<sup>197</sup>

In 2021, the UK Government said that “both Iran's nuclear programme and its destabilising behaviour in the region need to be addressed,” and that, from a UK perspective, stronger restrictions on the development of Iran's ballistic missiles would have been a “desirable feature” of the 2015 agreement. However, limiting Iran's nuclear programme remained the priority.<sup>198</sup>

## 3.2

### Will Iran continue to support armed groups?

As set out in section 1, Iran has also long provided financial and armed support to Hamas and other armed groups across the region. In April 2024, Iran also launched its first direct attack on Israel, launching around 330 drones and missiles. The Commons Library research briefing, [Israel-Iran April 2024: UK and international response](#) has background to the attack and the international response. Analysts judge that neither Israel nor Iran are seeking a direct conflict.

After his election in July 2024, new Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian reiterated that Iran would continue to oppose Israel and support “resistance

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<sup>193</sup> [Gulf states want Iran talks deal to address Tehran's missile program, support for proxy groups](#), Al-Monitor 16 June 2021

<sup>194</sup> Brookings Institute, [What the Iran deal has meant for Saudi Arabia and regional tensions](#), 13 July 2021

<sup>195</sup> [“We intend to build a positive relationship \[...\]”](#) France 24, 23 September 2022

<sup>196</sup> Foreign Affairs Committee, [No prosperity without justice: The UK's relationship with Iran](#), December 2020, HC 415, 2019-20, para 35

<sup>197</sup> [Iran says US made “new demands” in nuclear talks](#), France 24, 10 March 2022

<sup>198</sup> FCDO, [No prosperity without justice: The UK's relationship with Iran: Government response to \[Foreign Affairs\] Committee's fifth report](#), 16 February 2021, sections 2 and 7

groups”, such as Hezbollah and Hamas.<sup>199</sup> During the campaign, he praised the IRGC as a “source of pride”.<sup>200</sup>

### 3.3

## Will Iran improve its relationship with the Gulf?

### Historic tensions and relationship between the Arab Gulf and Iran

The Sunni monarchies of the Arab Gulf, particularly Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Bahrain, have historically been opposed to the Islamic Republic of Iran, seeing its ideology as a threat to their rule and stability. Most Arab states backed Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s. Tensions also build on the [Sunni-Shia divide](#) in the region.<sup>201</sup> Tensions include:

- In Bahrain: the Sunni rulers of the country, which is majority Shia, have accused Iran of supporting the pro-democracy protests in the country in 2011, something Iran denies.<sup>202</sup> Since 2011, groups linked to Iran in Bahrain have engaged in prominent acts of terrorism.<sup>203</sup>
- In Yemen: Saudi Arabia and the UAE have supported the internationally recognised government of Yemen militarily, in opposition to the Iran-backed Houthis.<sup>204</sup>
- In Lebanon: the Gulf Cooperation Council (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar Saudi Arabia, the UAE), declared Hezbollah a terrorist organisation in 2016.<sup>205</sup> Saudi Arabia has sought to influence anti-Hezbollah politicians in Lebanon.<sup>206</sup>
- In Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories: the UAE and Bahrain established diplomatic relations with Israel in 2020, and Saudi Arabia was reportedly close to coming to an agreement before 7 October 2023. All three are seeking to balance their relations with Israel with criticism during the Israel-Hamas conflict.<sup>207</sup> While Hamas has a political office in

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<sup>199</sup> [Iran's Pezeshkian assures Russia's Putin \[...\]](#), Al-Monitor, 9 July 2024; [Iran's president-elect vows support for Palestinians in talks with Hamas leader](#), BBC Monitoring, 14 July 2024

<sup>200</sup> [Highlights: Fourth debate in 2024 Iran presidential election](#), Press TV, 24 June 2024

<sup>201</sup> M Calulli and M Legrenzi, “Middle East security,” in L Fawcett, ed, International relations of the Middle East, pp219-34

<sup>202</sup> [Bahrain says it thwarted terror attack, seized weapons from Iran](#), Al-Monitor, 22 November 2021

<sup>203</sup> Atlantic Council, [Iran's long game in Bahrain](#), 18 December 2017, p8

<sup>204</sup> Commons Library, [Yemen in 2023: Conflict and status of peace talks](#)

<sup>205</sup> Wilson Center, [GCC and Arab League declare Hezbollah a terrorist organisation](#), 17 March 2016

<sup>206</sup> Arab Center Washington DC, [US curbs Saudi Arabia's surge in Lebanon](#), 14 November 2017

<sup>207</sup> Lords Library, [Abraham Accords: UK government policy](#), 5 September 2023; [Carnegie Endowment. The ratification of a Saudi-US deal looks increasingly unlikely](#), 24 June 2024

Qatar, rulers in Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Bahrain oppose Hamas and view its ideology as a threat to their rule.<sup>208</sup>

- In Syria, most Arab states broke off relations with President Assad in 2012, though mostly restored these from 2023.<sup>209</sup>

## Mediatory role of Kuwait, Oman and Qatar

Qatar, Kuwait and Oman have adopted a more mediatory approach between the Arab Gulf and Iran in recent years. For example, Qatar withdrew from the conflict in Yemen in 2017. Kuwait has also played a more limited role in the Yemen conflict. Oman did not support Iraq in the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s and has been able to play an important role in negotiations for the release of [dual nationals detained in Iran](#).<sup>210</sup>

## Rapprochement with Arab Gulf states in 2023

In 2016, Saudi-Iran diplomatic relations broke down following an attack on the Saudi embassy in Iran and Saudi Arabia's execution of a Shia religious leader convicted of terrorism charges.<sup>211</sup> Qatar and Bahrain also cut off diplomatic relations with Iran.

Under Chinese-brokered talks, in March 2023 Saudi Arabia and Iran agreed to restore formal diplomatic relations, as well as a security agreement originally made in 2001.<sup>212</sup> In the previous year, the Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammed Bin Salman, had said that a path to co-existence with Iran was needed:

They [Iran] are a neighbour forever, we cannot get rid of them and they cannot get rid of us. So its better for both of us to work it out and look at ways we can coexist.<sup>213</sup>

Qatar restored diplomatic relations with Iran in 2017.<sup>214</sup> In June 2024, Iran and Bahrain also agreed to start talks with the aim of restoring ties.<sup>215</sup>

## Risks and outlook for 2024

Analysts argued the restoration of Saudi-Iran ties would help reduce regional tensions, and potentially allow for a political settlement in Yemen. They note

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<sup>208</sup> Institute for National Security Studies, Tel Aviv University, [The Gulf states, Israel and Hamas](#), 2017

<sup>209</sup> Commons Library, [Syria's civil war in 2023: Assad back in the Arab League](#)

<sup>210</sup> European Council on Foreign Relations, [The Middle East's new battle lines: Qatar, Kuwait and Oman](#), 2018

<sup>211</sup> [Saudi Arabia cuts diplomatic ties with Iran](#), Al-Jazeera, 4 January 2016

<sup>212</sup> [Iran and Saudi Arabia agree to restore relations](#), Al-Jazeera, 10 March 2023

<sup>213</sup> [Saudi Crown Prince says Israel "potential ally."](#) France 24, 3 March 2022

<sup>214</sup> [Qatar restores diplomatic ties with Iran amid Gulf crisis](#), BBC News, 24 August 2017

<sup>215</sup> [Bahrain and Iran agree to start talks aimed at restoring ties](#), Al-Jazeera, 23 June 2024

that while these were not achieved, both have worked to avoid further escalation in the region after the 7 October 2023 Hamas assault.<sup>216</sup>

Risks remain in the relationship, however, with Iran's progress on its nuclear programme and its aim to eject the US from the region. Saudi Arabia is seeking to tie the US into the region through a security agreement.<sup>217</sup>

## 3.4

### Will Iran's ties with China and Russia affect the region?

As part of its “look to the east” strategy, to combat diplomatic isolation and compensate for the effects of US economic sanctions, Iran has sought to strengthen its ties with both China and Russia. This has included providing Russia with drones for deployment in Ukraine and joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the BRICS bloc of economies.<sup>218</sup>

Neither the SCO nor BRICS are Chinese or Russian dominated: India and South Africa were founding members of the BRICS and Saudi Arabia and the UAE joined in 2024, while the SCO similarly includes India and has several Arab Gulf states as dialogue partners.<sup>219</sup> Neither constitute a military alliance or are an integrative body, like NATO or the European Union.

#### China and Iran

China's ties with Iran are primarily economic, with media reports suggesting it is the primary buyer of US-sanctioned Iranian oil.<sup>220</sup>

However, China is also seeking to balance its expanding economic engagement with Arab States, whose value is much greater to China than Iran's. This is also the case in China's relationship with Israel.<sup>221</sup>

China does not list Hamas or Hezbollah as terrorist organisations, and in 2023/24 has sought to mediate between Hamas and Fatah in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and offered to mediate on the Israel-Hamas conflict. It

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<sup>216</sup> Wilson Center, [Saudi-Iran relations restored by remain tense](#), 9 March 2024

<sup>217</sup> International Crisis Group, [Great expectations: the future of Iranian-Saudi détente](#), 13 June 2024

<sup>218</sup> [Kremlin says Russia and Iran continuing work on cooperation pact](#), Reuters, 11 June 2024 Atlantic Council, [Iran joining the SCO isn't surprising \[...\]](#), 13 July 2023; US Institute for Peace, [Iran to join BRICS alliance](#), 24 August 2023; Commons Library, [China and the US in the Middle East: Iran and the Arab Gulf](#), 2022, section 5

<sup>219</sup> [BRICS: what is the group and which countries have joined?](#), BBC News, 1 February 2024; European Council on Foreign Relations, [East meets middle](#), 20 May 2024

<sup>220</sup> [Explainer: Iran's expanding oil trade with top buyer China](#), Reuters, 10 November 2023; CRS, [Iran's petroleum exports to China and US sanctions](#) (PDF), 8 May 2024

<sup>221</sup> American Enterprise Institute, [China: Global investment tracker](#), accessed 12 July 2024

has also opposed the US-led maritime coalition against the Houthis in the Red Sea.<sup>222</sup>

However, analysts judge China's leverage over Iran and ability to mediate in the conflict as limited.<sup>223</sup>

## Russia and Iran

Both Russia and Iran oppose American presence in the Middle East. Russian ties with Iran are primarily on military and security grounds, with Iran exporting ammunition and combat drones for use in Ukraine. Analysts argue this has meant Russia has lost some leverage over Iran.<sup>224</sup>

Like China, Russia has sought to shield Iran from criticism at the IAEA for its nuclear programme, though it is judged unlikely that it supports Iran gaining a nuclear weapon (as in the case of China, Russia is seeking to balance its relations with the UAE and Saudi Arabia, who oppose Iran gaining a weapon).<sup>225</sup>

Chatham House analysis notes that any attempt by Iran to get American sanctions lifted will first require it to revise its relations with Russia.<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> European Council on Foreign Relations, [How the Israel-Hamas war is testing China's diplomatic ambitions in the Middle East](#), 3 November 2023; US Institute for Peace, [What China wants in the Middle East](#), 1 November 2023; Foreign Policy, [China wants to weaken, not replace, the US in the Middle East](#), 29 February 2024

<sup>223</sup> As above

<sup>224</sup> US Institute for Peace, [Iran and Russia: burgeoning military ties](#), 5 September 2023; CSIS, [Collaboration for a price: Russia military-technology cooperation \[...\]](#), 22 May 2024

<sup>225</sup> Fridrich Ebert Stiftung, [Russia's invasion of Ukraine: The Iran nuclear price tag](#) (PDF), 2023; Carnegie, [Dimming prospects for US-Russia non-proliferation cooperation](#), 14 March 2024; CSIS, [Understanding the growing collaboration between Russia and Iran](#), 12 June 2024

<sup>226</sup> Chatham House, [Iran's election may change the direction of its relations with Russia](#), 28 June 2024

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