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Iran: Background and U.S. Policy

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SUMMARY

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Iran: Background and U.S. Policy

Congress has played a key role in shaping U.S. policy toward Iran, providing for extensive U.S. sanctions, providing aid and authorizing arms sales to partners threatened by Iran, seeking to influence negotiations over Iran's nuclear program, and enacting legislation that allows Congress to review related agreements. While indirect talks regarding Iran's nuclear program were at the forefront of U.S. Iran policy for most of 2022, by the end of the year, U.S. and international attention shifted following the outbreak of widespread protests in Iran, and the talks themselves appeared stalled.

2022 Political Protests. The September 2022 death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini, who was arrested by Iran's Morality Police for allegedly violating Iran's mandatory *hijab* (or head covering) law and died after reportedly having been beaten in custody, sparked nationwide unrest. While it is unclear whether the protests represent a "turning point," as some analysts and activists argue, they do appear to represent a significant challenge to the government's authority. The Biden Administration issued a number of new sanctions on Iranian officials in response to the protests; it also issued new general licenses aimed at expanding secure internet access for Iranian citizens.

Iran's Military. U.S. officials have expressed longstanding concern with the activities of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which provides arms, training, and support to a network of regional proxies and armed groups. In addition to IRGC support to U.S. adversaries in the Middle East, Iran maintains what U.S. officials describe as "the largest inventory of ballistic missiles in the region." Iran also maintains an arsenal of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs, or drones).

Iran's Foreign Policy. According to the 2022 *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community*, Iran seeks to erode U.S. influence in the Middle East while projecting power in neighboring states. Iran-backed militia forces in Iraq and Syria have carried out rocket, drone, and improvised explosive device (IED) attacks against U.S. and allied forces. Iran has provided thousands of rockets and short-range missiles to Lebanese Hezbollah, which the group has used in armed conflicts with Israel. Iran has provided Houthi militants in Yemen with ballistic and cruise missiles, as well as UAVs, that have enabled the Houthis to target Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Iran also has sought to strengthen its economic and military ties with China and Russia—for example, by exporting drones to bolster Russian military operations in Ukraine.

Iran's Nuclear Program. U.S. policymakers have long signaled concern that Tehran might seek to develop nuclear weapons, though Iranian leaders deny such ambitions. The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) imposed restraints on Iran's nuclear program in exchange for relief from most U.S. and UN Security Council economic sanctions. In 2018, the Trump Administration withdrew the United States from the JCPOA. Since the reimposition of U.S. sanctions in 2018 and resulting economic pressure, Iran has decreased its compliance with the nuclear commitments of the JCPOA. As of late 2022, the Biden Administration's indirect talks with Iran to revive the JCPOA appear to have stalled.

Issues for Congress. In recent years, congressional action on Iran has focused on sanctions, the JCPOA, and the use of U.S. military force.

- **Sanctions**. Since 1979, successive U.S. Administrations have imposed economic sanctions in an effort to change Iran's behavior, often at the direction of Congress. The United States has imposed sanctions on Iran's energy sector, arms and weapons-related technology transfers, financial sector, and various non-oil industries and sectors. Sanctions appear to have had a mixed impact on Iranian behavior.
- **Oversight of Nuclear Talks**. In 2015, Congress enacted the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act (INARA, P.L. 114-17), which mandates congressional review of related agreements and provides for consideration of legislation to potentially block their implementation. Some in Congress who have opposed Biden Administration efforts to revive the JCPOA have indicated that they might use INARA to block or at least complicate a potential future agreement.
- **Authorizing or Prohibiting the Use of Force**. Congress has sometimes asserted its war powers when U.S.-Iran tensions have raised the prospect of a wider military conflict. This has generally taken the form of legislation stating that the use of force against Iran is not authorized, though Congress has not taken action to restrain the President's ability to deploy U.S. armed forces that have at times engaged in hostilities with Iranian or Iran-backed forces outside of Iranian territory.

Contents

Overview and Issues for Congress 1
Iran's Political System 2
2022 Political Protests 3
Iran's Military: Structure and Capabilities 4
Foreign Policy and Regional Activities 6
Regional Proxies and Allies 7
Iran's Relations with China and Russia 8
Iran's Nuclear Program 9
U.S.-Iran Relations: History and Recent Approaches 10
Approaches under the Trump and Biden Administrations 10
Trump Administration Policy 11
Biden Administration Policy 12
Issues for Congress 13
Sanctions 13
Oversight of Nuclear Talks/Agreement 16
Authorizing or Prohibiting the Use of Force 17
Outlook and Congressional Options 18

Figures

Figure 1. Iran at a Glance 1

Contacts

Author Information 19

Overview and Issues for Congress

The Islamic Republic of Iran, the second-largest country in the Middle East by size (after Saudi Arabia) and population (after Egypt), has for decades played an assertive, and by many accounts destabilizing, role in the region and beyond. Iran's influence stems from its oil reserves (the world's fourth largest), its status as the world's most populous Shia Muslim country, and its active support for political and armed groups (including several U.S.-designated terrorist organizations) throughout the Middle East.

Since the Iranian Revolution that ushered in the Islamic Republic in 1979, Iran has presented a major foreign policy challenge for the United States. Successive U.S. Administrations have identified Iran and its activities as a threat to the United States and its interests. Of particular concern are Iran's nuclear program and its support for numerous armed factions and terrorist groups throughout the region. The U.S. government has used a range of policy tools intended to reduce the threat posed by Iran, including sanctions, limited military action, and diplomatic engagement; however, Iran's regional influence and strategic capabilities remain considerable and have arguably increased.

Congress has played a key role in shaping U.S. policy toward Iran, providing for extensive U.S. sanctions, providing aid and authorizing arms sales for partners threatened by Iran, seeking to influence negotiations over Iran's nuclear program, and enacting legislation that allows Congress to review related agreements. As the Biden Administration engaged in negotiations intended to reestablish mutual compliance with the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Members expressed a range of views. The prominence of the JCPOA in U.S. policy towards Iran seems to have waned in late 2022 because of other developments, most importantly nationwide unrest in Iran. In response to those developments, Members may consider legislative or other action to influence aspects of U.S. policy toward Iran, including sanctions, the JCPOA, and the use of U.S. military force.

Figure 1. Iran at a Glance

Geography	*Total Area:* 1,648,195 sq km (636,372 sq. mile), 2.5 times the size of Texas

People	*Population:* 86,758,304 (17th in the world) *% of Population 14 or Younger:* 24.1% *Religion:* Muslim 99.6% (90-95% Shia, 5-10% Sunni), other (Zoroastrian, Christian, and Jewish) 0.3% (2016) *Literacy:* 85.5% (male 90.4%, female 80.8%) (2016)
Economy	*GDP Per Capita (at purchasing power parity):* $17,159 (2021) *Real GDP Growth:* 4.7% (2021); 3.2% (2022 projection) *Year-on-year Inflation:* 54% (July 2022) *Unemployment:* 8.9% (2021); 8.7% (2022 projection)

Source: Graphic created by CRS. Fact information (2022 estimates unless otherwise specified) from Economist Intelligence Unit and Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*.

Iran's Political System[1]

Iran's Islamic Republic was established in 1979, ending the autocratic monarchy of the Shah, and is a hybrid political system that defies simple characterization. Iran has a parliament, regular elections, and some other features of representative democracy. In practice, though, the government is authoritarian, ranking 154th out of 167 countries in the Economist Intelligence Unit's 2021 Democracy Index.[2] Shia Islam is the state religion and the basis for all legislation and jurisprudence, and political contestation is tightly controlled, with ultimate decisionmaking power held by the Supreme Leader. That title has been held by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei since 1989, when he succeeded the Islamic Republic's founding leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. In September 2022, Khamenei appeared to have suffered a bout of significant illness; prospects for leadership succession are unclear.

Iran's top directly elected position is the presidency, which, like the directly elected unicameral parliament (the Islamic Consultative Assembly, also known as the *Majles*) and every other organ of Iran's government, is subordinate to the Supreme Leader. Incumbent president Ebrahim Raisi, a hardliner close to Khamenei, won the June 2021 election to succeed Hassan Rouhani, who won elections in 2013 and 2017. Rouhani, who oversaw Iran's negotiations with the United States and its entry into the JCPOA, was seen as relatively moderate. The 2018 U.S. exit from the JCPOA and reimposition of sanctions, as well as the January 2020 U.S. killing of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)-Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani, appeared to shift public support away from moderates like Rouhani.[3] Hardliners prevailed in February 2020 *Majles* elections.

Rouhani was term-limited and ineligible to run in the June 2021 presidential election; the government also banned several moderate candidates from running. These circumstances might have contributed to this election having the lowest turnout in the Islamic Republic's history; slightly less than half (49%) of eligible Iranians voted. Raisi, who reportedly played a role in a judicial decision to approve the execution of thousands of political prisoners in 1988, had lost the

[1] For additional background, see CRS Report RL32048, *Iran: Internal Politics and U.S. Policy and Options*, by Kenneth Katzman; congressional offices may also contact the authors of this report.

[2] Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2021: The China challenge*, February 10, 2022.

[3] Garrett Nada, "Iran's Parliamentary Polls: Hardliners on the Rise, Reformists Ruled Out," United States Institute of Peace, February 12, 2021. In Iran's political system, hardliners are also known as "principlists," moderates as "reformists."

2017 presidential election to Rouhani. In 2019 Khamenei appointed Raisi to head Iran's judiciary. Raisi's presidential victory may boost his chances of succeeding Khamenei as Supreme Leader.[4]

Mass demonstrations shook Iran in 2009 and 2010, and Iran has experienced significant unrest intermittently since then, including in December 2017, summer 2018, late 2019, and September and October 2022 based most frequently on economic conditions but also reflecting other opposition to Iran's leadership. The government has often used violence to disperse protests, in which hundreds have been killed by security forces. U.S. and UN assessments have long cited Iran for a wide range of human rights abuses in addition to its repression of political dissent and use of force against protesters, including severe violations of religious freedom and women's rights, human trafficking, and corporal punishment.

2022 Political Protests

The September 16, 2022, death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini, who was arrested by Iran's Morality Police for allegedly violating Iran's mandatory *hijab* (or head covering) law and died after reportedly having been beaten in custody, has sparked nationwide unrest. In protests throughout the country, demonstrators have called for an end to the Islamic Republic, chanting "death to the dictator," and women and girls have burned their *hijabs*. In response, the government has deployed security forces who have killed dozens of protesters, and has shut down internet access. While it is unclear whether the protests represent a "turning point," as some activists claim, they appear to represent a significant challenge to the government's authority. One observer has compared 2022 unrest to the circumstances that preceded the 1979 Islamic Revolution.[5] The protests have not, as of November 2022, taken the form of mass gatherings in major urban centers of hundreds of thousands of demonstrators (as protests in 2009 did); instead, they have been smaller and more geographically dispersed, and have reportedly included protestors from a diverse range of social groups.

Observers have contrasted what they characterize as the Obama Administration's relatively restrained approach to the 2009 protest movement with the Biden Administration's more assertive support for protests in 2022.[6] On September 22, 2022, the U.S. Department of the Treasury designated for sanctions Iran's Morality Police (also known as Guidance Patrol), a component of Iran's Law Enforcement Forces. The Morality Police is designated pursuant to Executive Order (E.O.) 13553, which imposes sanctions with respect to serious human rights abuses by the government of Iran.[7] On September 23, the U.S. Department of the Treasury issued Iran General License D-2, designed to expand the range of internet services available to Iranians in response to what officials described as the Iranian government's move to "cut off access to the Internet for most of its 80 million citizens to prevent the world from watching its violent crackdown on peaceful protestors."[8] Treasury officials stated that the new license expands, among other things, access to cloud-based services—allowing Iranians to access Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) and

[4] Parisa Hafezi, "Winner of Iran presidency is hardline judge who is under U.S. sanctions," *Reuters,* June 20, 2021.

[5] Ray Takeyh, "A second Iranian revolution?" *Commentary,* November 2022;

[6] Olivier Knox, "On Iran protests, Biden goes faster and farther than Obama," *Washington Post,* September 23, 2022; David Sanger, "Biden's support for Iran protesters comes after bitter lessons of 2009," *New York Times,* September 26, 2022.

[7] U.S. Department of the Treasury Press Release, "Treasury Sanctions Iran's Morality Police and Senior Security Officials for Violence Against Protesters and the Death of Mahsa Amini," September 22, 2022.

[8] U.S. Department of the Treasury Press Release, "U.S. Treasury Issues Iran General License D-2 to Increase Support for Internet Freedom," September 23, 2022.

anti-surveillance tools critical to secure communication.[9] In Congress, several bills and resolutions in the House (H.R. 9075, H.Con.Res. 110, H.Res. 1397) and the Senate (S.Con.Res. 47, S.Res. 803) would condemn the killing of Amini and the Iranian government's use of violence against protestors.

Iran's Military: Structure and Capabilities[10]

Given the adversarial nature of U.S.-Iran relations and the centrality of various military-related entities in Iranian domestic and foreign policy, Iran's military has been a subject of sustained engagement by Congress and other U.S. policymakers. The elements of Iran's military that arguably threaten U.S. interests most directly are Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the country's missile and unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV, or drone) programs.

Iran's traditional military force, the *Artesh*, is a legacy of Iran's Shah-era military force. The *Artesh* exists alongside the IRGC, which Khomeini established in 1979 as a force loyal to the new regime. Rivalries between the two parallel forces (each have their own land, air, and naval force components) stem from their "uneven access to resources, varying levels of influence with the regime, and inherent overlap in missions and responsibilities."[11] While both serve to defend Iran against external threats, the *Artesh* is deployed primarily along Iran's borders to counter any invading force, while the IRGC has a more ideological character and the more expansive mission of combating internal threats and expanding Iran's influence abroad. Elements of the IRGC include:

- The *Basij*, a "volunteer paramilitary reserve force," which plays a key role in suppressing protests and other forms of internal dissent.[12]
- The IRGC *Qods Force* (IRGC-QF), which coordinates Iran's regional activities, providing arms, training, and other forms of support to the network of proxies and armed groups that share Iran's objectives (see "Regional Activities and Strategy" below).

Ballistic Missiles

According to U.S. officials, Iran has "the largest inventory of ballistic missiles in the region," and, as of 2022, has steadily improved the range and accuracy of its more than 3,000 ballistic missiles over "the last five to seven years."[13] Those missiles, acquired through imports from international suppliers like North Korea as well as domestic production and research, "constitute an exigent threat to the security of every state in the region," according to former CENTCOM Commander General Frank McKenzie.[14] Iran has used its ballistic missiles to target U.S. regional assets directly, including a January 2020 attack (shortly following the U.S. killing of IRGC-QF

[9] U.S. Department of State, "Briefing with Senior Administration Officials on the Administration's Efforts to Advance the Free Flow of Information For the Iranian People," September 23, 2022.

[10] For additional background, see CRS Report R44017, *Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies*, by Kenneth Katzman; congressional offices may also contact the authors of this report.

[11] Defense Intelligence Agency, *Iran Military Power: Ensuring Regime Survival and Securing Regional Dominance*, 2019.

[12] Ibid.

[13] *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community*, March 8, 2022; Senate Armed Services Committee Hearing, March 15, 2022, available at http://www.cq.com/doc/congressionaltranscripts-6484358.

[14] Senate Armed Services Committee Hearing, op. cit.

Commander Soleimani) against Iraqi sites where U.S. military forces were stationed that left scores of U.S. service members injured, and missile and drone attacks against Iraq's Kurdistan region in March and September 2022.[15]

Iran's medium-range ballistic missiles are assessed by the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) to have a maximum range of around 2,000 kilometers from Iran's borders, reportedly capable of reaching targets as far as Israel or southeastern Europe.[16] U.S. officials and others express concern that Iran could use its nascent space program to develop longer-range missiles, including intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs).[17] In March 2022, the Biden Administration designated for sanctions five Iranian individuals and entities for their involvement in ballistic missile activities.[18]

UAVs

Iran has also developed a sophisticated arsenal of UAVs, its "most rapidly advancing air capability" per the Defense Intelligence Agency in 2019, with which it has attacked numerous foreign targets.[19] While Iranian drones are not as technologically complex or advanced as the U.S. UAVs on which the Iranian versions are often modeled, they are a cost-effective way of projecting power, especially given Iran's underdeveloped air force. Traditional air defense systems have difficulty intercepting UAVs, in part because such systems were designed to detect manned aircraft with larger radar and/or heat signatures.[20] Iran's drone operations include attacks in September 2019 against Saudi oil production facilities in Abqaiq, a complex assault that featured 18 drones and several land-attack cruise missiles; in July 2021 against an oil tanker off the coast of Oman; and in October 2021 against a U.S. military base in At Tanf, Syria. The Biden Administration has designated for sanctions individuals and entities that have "provided critical support" to the IRGC's UAV programs,[21] and in April 2022 the House passed a bill (H.R. 6089) that would require the President to impose sanctions on persons that engage in activities related to Iranian UAVs.[22] In August 2022, Iran reportedly began transferring armed drones to Russia, which has used them against Ukrainian forces and civilian infrastructure.[23]

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[15] "Who would live and who would die: The inside story of the Iranian attack on Al Asad Airbase," *CBS News*, August 8, 2021; "Iran attacks Iraq's Erbil with missiles in warning to U.S., allies," *Reuters*, March 13, 2022; White House press release, "Statement by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan on Iran's Missile and Drone Attacks in Northern Iraq," September 28, 2022.

[16] *Iran Military Power*, op. cit. 43.

[17] *Annual Threat Assessment*, op. cit.; Farzin Nadimi, "Iran's ballistic missile arsenal is still growing in size, reach, and accuracy," *Washington Institute*, December 13, 2021.

[18] U.S. Department of the Treasury Press Release, "Treasury Sanctions Key Actors in Iran's Ballistic Missile Program," March 30, 2022.

[19] *Iran Military Power*, op. cit.

[20] Golnaz Esfandiari, "Iran deploys drones to target internal threats, protect external interests," *RFE/RL*, January 18, 2022.

[21] U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury sanctions network and individuals in connection with Iran's unmanned aerial vehicle program," October 29, 2021.

[22] The bill would amend Section 107 of the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA. P.L. 115-44) to include unmanned combat aerial vehicles.

[23] Ellen Nakashima and Joby Warrick, "Iran sends first shipment of drones to Russia for use in Ukraine," *Washington Post*, August 29, 2022; Yaroslav Trofimov and Dion Nissenbaum, "Russia's use of Iranian kamikaze drones creates new dangers for Ukrainian troops," *Wall Street Journal*, September 17, 2022.

Foreign Policy and Regional Activities[24]

Iran's foreign policy appears to reflect overlapping and at times contradictory motivations. These include:

Threat Perception. Iran's leaders argue that the United States and its allies seek to overturn Iran's regime, claiming, for example, that the U.S. military presence in and around the Persian Gulf reflects an intent to intimidate or attack Iran. Iran describes its missile program and other military programs as "defensive," arguing that they serve as a deterrent to attacks by hostile powers.[25] Iranian leaders have witnessed U.S. military intervention in two of Iran's neighboring states (Iraq and Afghanistan), and continue to reference what former Secretary of State Albright described as the "significant role" played by the United States in "orchestrating the overthrow of Iran's popular Prime Minister, Mohammed Massadegh" in 1953.[26] Iranian leaders describe U.S. sanctions as economic warfare against Iran.[27]

Ideology. Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution replaced a secular, U.S.-backed authoritarian leader with a Shia cleric-dominated regime, and that change infuses Iran's foreign policy. Another ideological element of the Islamic Revolution is the regime's steadfast rhetorical opposition to the existence of Israel. Since the revolution, that enmity has fed Iran-Israel tensions, with broad implications for the region and U.S. policy.[28]

Pragmatism. Iranian leaders have expressed a commitment to aiding other Shia Muslims, but at times have tempered that approach to preserve Iran's geopolitical interests. For example, Iran has supported Christian-inhabited Armenia, rather than Shi'a-inhabited Azerbaijan, possibly in part to thwart cross-border Azeri nationalism among Iran's large Azeri minority.[29] President Raisi has also tried to improve relations with neighboring Gulf states, an effort that appears to place domestic economic concerns ahead of traditional regional rivalries.[30]

Factional Interests and Competition. Iran's foreign policy has reflected differing approaches among key internal actors and groups. Supreme Leader Khamenei sits at the apex of several decisionmaking and advisory councils dominated by hardliners that seek to shield Iran from Western political and cultural influence. More moderate Iranian leaders, such as former President Hassan Rouhani, have at times sought to use engagement with the West as a way to attract greater foreign investment and boost Iran's economy.[31]

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[24] For additional background, see CRS Report R44017, *Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies*, by Kenneth Katzman; congressional offices may also contact the authors of this report.

[25] Omer Carmi, "Khamenei's First Speech of 2021: Reemphasizing U.S. Weakness, Iranian Self-Reliance," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 8, 2021; "Iran's defensive power must increase daily and it does: Imam Khamenei," *Khamenei.Ir*, February 27, 2018.

[26] Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright, Remarks before the American-Iranian Council, March 17, 2000; "Conflicts between Iran and US goes back to 1953 coup," *Khamenei.Ir*, November 2, 2022.

[27] "Sanctions are 'US way of war', Iranian President at UN," UN News, September 21, 2021.

[28] For more information on Israel's approach to threats it perceives from Iran, as relevant to U.S. foreign policy, see CRS Report R44245, *Israel: Background and U.S. Relations in Brief*, by Jim Zanotti.

[29] Borzou Daraghi, "Nagorno-Karaback: An unexpected conflict that tests and perplexes Iran," Atlantic Council, November 9, 2020; Vali Kaleji, "Iran increasingly uneasy about threats to common border with Armenia," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, October 14, 2022.

[30] "Iran's regional agenda and the call for détente with the Gulf states," Middle East Institute, March 17, 2022.

[31] "Iranian President Hassan Rouhani in Paris to court investors," *Los Angeles Times*, January 27, 2016.

Regional Proxies and Allies

U.S. officials characterize Iran's support for regional proxies and allies as a threat to U.S. interests and forces in the region. The 2022 Worldwide Threat Assessment predicted that, "Iran will continue to threaten U.S. interests as it tries to erode U.S. influence in the Middle East, entrench its influence and project power in neighboring states [...] Iranian-supported proxies will launch attacks against U.S. forces and persons in Iraq and Syria, and perhaps on other countries and regions."[32]

Iraq. Iran-backed militia forces in Iraq continue to carry out intermittent rocket, drone, and improvised explosive device (IED) attacks against U.S. and Iraqi facilities and support systems. These groups seek to revise or rescind Iraq's invitation to the U.S. military to retain an advisory presence in Iraq beyond the withdrawal of U.S. combat forces from the country in December 2021. They also seek to retaliate for the January 2020 U.S. strike in Baghdad that killed IRGC-Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani and the head of the Iran-backed Iraqi militia Kata'ib Hezbollah.[33] Iran also has carried out strikes in Iraq's Kurdistan region, targeting what Iran alleges are support networks for Israel and Iraq-based Iranian Kurdish opposition groups.

Syria. Iran-backed militias have used Syria as a base from which to target U.S. armed forces and facilities in Iraq. They also have targeted U.S. forces in Syria in what U.S. officials have sometimes described as retaliation for Israeli airstrikes on Iranian forces in Syria.[34] U.S. officials assess that Iran seeks a permanent military presence in Syria to bolster its regional influence, support Lebanon's Hezbollah, and threaten Israel.[35]

Lebanon. Iran's support for Hezbollah, including providing thousands of rockets and short-range missiles, helps Iran acquire leverage against key regional adversaries such as Israel and Saudi Arabia. Israel has stated that Iran may be supplying Hezbollah with advanced weapons systems and technologies, and assisting Hezbollah in creating an indigenous production capability for rockets, missiles, and drones that could threaten Israel from Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, or Yemen.[36]

Yemen. Iran's support to the Houthi movement in Yemen—including supplying ballistic and cruise missiles, as well as unmanned systems—has enabled the group to target U.S. partners, including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.[37]

Gaza Strip. Iran continues to support the Palestinian Sunni Islamist militant groups Hamas and Palestine Islamic Jihad (PIJ), whose Gaza-based operations threaten parts of Israel with rockets, missiles, and drones. Both groups also seek to make inroads into the West Bank to undermine Israeli and Palestinian Authority control there.

[32] Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community*, February 2022.

[33] For additional background see, CRS Report R46148, *U.S. Killing of Qasem Soleimani: Frequently Asked Questions*, coordinated by Clayton Thomas.

[34] "Strike on U.S. Base Was Iranian Response to Israeli Attack, Officials Say," *New York Times*, November 18, 2021.

[35] See, for example, Posture statement of General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr., before the Senate Armed Services Committee, March 15, 2022.

[36] *Missile Multinational: Iran's New Approach to Missile Proliferation*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, April 2021; "Israeli minister says Iran using Syria facilities for weapons production," *Reuters*, September 12, 2022.

[37] Seth Jones et al., "The Iranian and Houthi war against Saudi Arabia," Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 21, 2021; Bruce Reidel, "Yemen war spreads to the UAE," Brookings, February 10, 2022.

Iran's Relations with China and Russia

Iran has sought to maintain and expand economic and military ties with Beijing and Moscow, reflecting what analysts describe as a "look to the East" strategy favored by hardline leaders including President Raisi and Supreme Leader Khamenei.[38]

China. For the past several decades, the People's Republic of China (PRC or China) has taken steps to deepen its financial presence in numerous sectors of the Iranian economy, as well as to expand military cooperation between the two states.[39] The PRC is Iran's largest trade partner and the largest importer of Iran's crude oil and condensates.[40] Over the years, the PRC has become a source of capital for Iran, in line with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which includes a series of energy and transportation corridors extending throughout Eurasia. On March 27, 2021, Iran and the PRC signed a 25-year China-Iran Comprehensive Cooperation Plan "to tap the potential for cooperation in areas such as economy and culture and map out prospects for cooperation in the long run."[41] Before doing so was banned by the UN Security Council, the PRC openly supplied Iran with advanced conventional arms, including cruise missile-armed fast patrol boats that the IRGC Navy operates in the Persian Gulf; anti-ship missiles; ballistic missile guidance systems; and other technology related to the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD).[42] U.S. officials also report that PRC-based entities have supplied Iran-backed armed groups with UAV technology.[43] The United States has imposed sanctions on a number of PRC-based entities for allegedly supplying Iran's missile, nuclear, and conventional weapons programs.

Russia has traditionally been Iran's main supplier of conventional weaponry and a significant supplier of nuclear energy and missile-related technology (for the latter, Russian companies have been subject to U.S. sanctions). U.S. officials have expressed concern with Iran-Russia military cooperation, particularly in Syria. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in early 2022, Russia and Iran—both under U.S. sanctions—have explored expanding bilateral and energy cooperation.[44] In June 2022, Iran and Argentina applied to join the emerging economies alliance of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS); Russian officials sought to frame the applications as an indicator that U.S. efforts to isolate Russia over its operations in Ukraine were failing, and China has expressed support for Iran's membership.[45] As mentioned above, Iran has reportedly transferred drones to Russia for use in Ukraine (which Iran denies), and in September 2022 reportedly agreed to supply Russia with additional drones as well as short-range ballistic missiles.[46]

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[38] "Iran Turns East," *Foreign Policy*, October 26, 2021; "Will Iran look east if nuclear deal talks fail?" *Al Monitor*, May 14, 2022; "How Iran's interpretation of the world order affects its foreign policy," Atlantic Council, May 11, 2022.

[39] "China, With $400 Billion Iran Deal, Could Deepen Influence in Mideast," *New York Times*, March 27, 2021.

[40] U.S. Energy Information Administration, "Country Analysis Executive Summary: Iran," July 16, 2021.

[41] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, "Wang Yi Holds Talks with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif," March 28, 2021, at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/ceus/eng/zgyw/t1865100.htm.

[42] Defense Intelligence Agency, Iran Military Power: Ensuring Regime Survival and Securing Regional Dominance, 2019.

[43] Testimony of Department of State Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Barbara Leaf before the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Near East, South Asia, Central Asia and Counterterrorism, August 4, 2022.

[44] "Russia's Lavrov in Iran to Discuss Nuclear Deal, Cooperation," Reuters, June 22, 2022.

[45] "Iran applies to join China and Russia in BRICS club," *Reuters*, June 27, 2022; "Xi calls ties with Iran strategic, backs Iran's membership in BRICS," *Modern Diplomacy*, September 17, 2022.

[46] Joby Warrick et al., "Iran plans to send missiles, drones to Russia for Ukraine war, officials say," *Washington Post*,

Iran's Nuclear Program[47]

U.S. policymakers have signaled concern since the mid-1970s that Tehran, which began nuclear activities in the 1950s, might develop nuclear weapons. Iran's construction of gas centrifuge uranium enrichment facilities is currently the main source of proliferation concern. Gas centrifuges can produce both low-enriched uranium (LEU), which can be used in nuclear power reactors, and weapons-grade highly enriched uranium (HEU), which is one of the two types of fissile material used in nuclear weapons. Iranian leaders claim that the country seeks enriched uranium only for its current and future civil nuclear reactors, not for military purposes.

U.S. policy has focused on using various means of coercive diplomacy to pressure Iran to agree to limits on its nuclear program. The Obama Administration pursued a "dual track" strategy of stronger economic pressure through increased sanctions coupled with offers of sanctions relief if Iran accepted constraints on the nuclear program. U.S. and multilateral sanctions contributed to Iran's 2013 decision to enter into negotiations that concluded in the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)

The JCPOA imposed restraints on Iran's nuclear program in exchange for relief from most U.S. and UN Security Council economic sanctions. The agreement restricted Iran's enrichment and heavy water reactor programs and provided for enhanced International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) monitoring to detect Iranian efforts to produce nuclear weapons using either declared or covert facilities. The nuclear-related provisions of the agreement, according to U.S. officials in 2015, extended the nuclear breakout time—the amount of time that Iran would need to produce enough weapons-grade HEU for one nuclear weapon—to a minimum of one year, for a duration of at least 10 years.[48] In addition to the restrictions on activities related to fissile material production, the JCPOA indefinitely prohibited Iranian "activities which could contribute to the design and development of a nuclear explosive device," including research and diagnostic activities. The IAEA continues to monitor Iranian compliance with the JCPOA provisions but since 2019 has reported diminishing Iranian cooperation with its activities.[49]

Sanctions Relief.[50] In accordance with the JCPOA, U.S. secondary sanctions—restrictions on any third country engaging in some types of trade with Iran, primarily in the energy sector—were waived or terminated in 2016, but most sanctions on direct U.S.-Iran trade remained. The secondary sanctions eased during JCPOA implementation included (1) sanctions that limited Iran's exportation of oil and foreign sales to Iran of gasoline and energy sector equipment, and which limited foreign investment in Iran's energy sector; (2) financial sector sanctions, including trading in Iran's currency, the *rial*; and (3) sanctions on Iran's auto sector. The European Union

October 16, 2022.

[47] Material in this section is drawn from CRS Report R43333, *Iran Nuclear Agreement and U.S. Exit*," by Paul Kerr and Kenneth Katzman, which contains additional information on Iran's nuclear program and the JCPOA.

[48] "Background Conference Call by Senior Administration Officials on Iran," July 14, 2015. U.S. Secretary of Energy Ernest Moniz described this timeline as "very, very conservative" in an April 2015 interview (Michael Crowley, "Ernest Moniz: Iran Deal Closes Enrichment Loophole," *Politico*, April 7, 2015).

[49] CRS Report R40094, *Iran's Nuclear Program: Tehran's Compliance with International Obligations*, by Paul K. Kerr.

[50] For additional details on sanctions waived under the JCPOA, see CRS Report RS20871, *Iran Sanctions*, by Kenneth Katzman; congressional offices may also contact the authors of this report.

(EU) lifted its ban on purchases of oil and gas from Iran; and Iranian banks were readmitted to the SWIFT financial messaging services system.[51] The UN Security Council revoked its resolutions that required member states to impose restrictions. The JCPOA did not require the lifting of U.S. sanctions on direct U.S.-Iran trade or sanctions levied for Iran's support for regional armed factions and terrorist groups, its human rights abuses, or its efforts to acquire missile and advanced conventional weapons technology. U.S. sanctions lifted to implement the JCPOA were reimposed in 2018 (see below).

U.S.-Iran Relations: History and Recent Approaches

Under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, an authoritarian monarch who ruled from 1941 until 1979, Iran was a close U.S. security partner, receiving a total of nearly $15 billion in U.S. foreign assistance to buttress its position against the neighboring Soviet Union.[52] Domestically, the Shah's social policies achieved some results but also alienated many Iranians; the government jailed (and sometimes tortured) tens of thousands as political prisoners. Many other Iranians went into exile abroad, including prominent Shia cleric Ayatollah Ali Khomeini. Mass public protests by both religious and secular Iranians against the Shah's rule escalated throughout 1978, culminating in the Shah's January 1979 flight into exile, Khomeini's return the following month, and the March 1979 replacement of the monarchy with a new Islamic Republic that quickly moved to suppress domestic opposition.

The 1979 Islamic Revolution marked a turning point for U.S. policy toward Iran, and the two countries have not had diplomatic relations since 1980, a result of the U.S. Embassy hostage crisis.[53] U.S.-Iran tensions continued in the following decade, punctuated by armed confrontations in the Gulf and Iran-backed terrorist attacks (including the 1983 bombings of the U.S. embassy and Marine barracks in Beirut). U.S. sanctions, first imposed in 1979, continued apace with the government of Iran's designation as a state sponsor of international terrorism in 1984, the imposition of an embargo on U.S. trade with and investment in Iran in 1995, and the first imposition of secondary sanctions (U.S. penalties against firms that invest in Iran's energy sector) in 1996.

Approaches under the Trump and Biden Administrations

In comparing recent Administrations' approaches to Iran, various points of continuity and change emerge, with Biden Administration policy apparently continuing elements of both the Obama and Trump Administrations. The Trump Administration reimposed sanctions that the Obama Administration had imposed prior to the JCPOA but lifted as part of that deal, and sanctions newly imposed by the Trump Administration remain in place under the Biden Administration. At the same time, the Biden Administration has sought to resuscitate the JCPOA, but the United States and Iran have not engaged directly as happened under the Obama Administration. The September 2022 outbreak of nationwide unrest in Iran appears to have shifted the Biden Administration's focus away from reviving the JCPOA, prospects for the revival of which were dimming.

[51] The Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT), based in Belgium, provides a financial messaging service to facilitate cross-border transactions, including payments involving multiple currencies. International energy-sector trade heavily depends on SWIFT services.

[52] Figure is in constant dollars (retrieved September 2022) from foreignassistance.gov.

[53] For an account of the crisis, see Mark Bowden, *Guests of the Ayatollah* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 2006).

Trump Administration Policy

U.S. policy toward Iran shifted significantly under the Trump Administration. As a candidate, Donald Trump spoke against the JCPOA as "one of the worst deals ever made by any country in history" and said "my number one priority is to dismantle the disastrous deal with Iran."[54] Though then-President Trump initially certified to Congress in April and July 2017 that Iran was in compliance with the agreement (under an INARA requirement to submit such a report every 90 days),[55] in October 2017 President Trump announced he would not submit another certification of Iranian compliance, saying, "Iran is not living up to the spirit of the deal."[56] In January 2018, President Trump announced that he would again waive the application of certain energy-sector sanctions as a "last chance" to "secure our European allies' agreement to fix" the JCPOA.[57] No such deal was reached, and President Trump announced on May 8, 2018, that the United States would cease participating in the JCPOA, reinstating all sanctions that the United States had waived or terminated in meeting in meeting its JCPOA obligations. All sanctions went back into effect as of November 2018.

In articulating a new Iran strategy in May 2018, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said that due to "unprecedented financial pressure" through reimposed U.S. sanctions, U.S. military deterrence, and U.S. advocacy, "we hope, and indeed we expect, that the Iranian regime will come to its senses."[58] He also laid out 12 demands for any future agreement with Iran, including the withdrawal of Iranian support for armed groups and proxies throughout the region. Iran's leaders rejected U.S. demands and insisted the United States return to compliance with the JCPOA before engaging on a new or revised accord. The Trump Administration policy of applying "maximum pressure" on Iran after late 2018 took two forms: additional sanctions and limited military action. After U.S. sanctions were reinstated in November 2018, the Administration designated for sanctions a number of additional entities under existing authorities (e.g., designating Iran's Central Bank under Executive Order (E.O.) 13224, adding to the Central Bank's designation as a proliferation entity under E.O. 13382); issued new authorities (e.g., E.O. 13876, sanctioning the office of the Supreme Leader); and designated the entirety of Iran as a "jurisdiction of primary money laundering concern."[59]

From mid-2019 on, Iran escalated its regional military activities, periodically coming into direct military conflict with the United States (such when Iran shot down an unmanned U.S. surveillance drone over the Persian Gulf in June 2019). Iranian attacks against oil tankers in the Persian Gulf and a complex September 2019 drone attack against Saudi Arabian oil production facilities further increased tensions. Those tensions peaked in the Trump Administration's January 3, 2020, killing of IRGC-Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani in Baghdad, and Iran's retaliatory strikes against U.S. forces in Iraq.[60] Iran responded with ballistic missile attacks

[54] "Full transcript: First 2016 presidential debate," *Politico*, September 27, 2016; "Read Donald Trump's Speech to AIPAC," *Time*, March 21, 2016.

[55] Sections 135(d)(6) of the Atomic Energy Act of 1954 as added by INARA (P.L. 114-17).

[56] "Transcript: Trump's Remarks on Iran nuclear deal," *NPR*, October 13, 2017. The October 2017 decertification triggered a 60-day window for Congress to consider, under expedited procedures per INARA, legislation to re-impose sanctions lifted as part of the U.S. implementation of the JCPOA. Congress did not do so.

[57] Statement by the President on the Iran Nuclear Deal, White House, January 12, 2018.

[58] "After the Deal: A New Iran Strategy," Heritage Foundation, May 21, 2018.

[59] Department of the *Treasury, Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCEN), 31 Code Federal Regulations Part 1010, 84 Federal* Register 59302.

[60] For more, see CRS Report R46148, *U.S. Killing of Qasem Soleimani: Frequently Asked Questions*.

against U.S. forces based in Iraq that left over one hundred U.S. military personnel injured, and attacks by Iran-backed forces in Iraq against U.S. targets continued over the following year.

Biden Administration Policy

As a presidential candidate, Joe Biden described the Trump Administration's Iran policy as a "dangerous failure" that had isolated the United States from its international partners, allowed Iran to increase its stockpiles of enriched uranium, and raised tensions throughout the region.[61] He pledged to "offer Tehran a credible path back to diplomacy" by promising to have the United States rejoin the JCPOA as long as "Iran returns to strict compliance" with it.

Less than a month after taking office, the Biden Administration offered to restart talks with Iran to revive the JCPOA and appointed Robert Malley as Special Envoy for Iran. However, Iran refused to engage directly with the United States until the United States decreased sanctions pressure, leading to a standstill: U.S. officials argued of Iran that "the ball is in [its] court" even as Iranian President Rouhani argued, "America was first in breaking with the agreement and it should be the first to return to it."[62] This difference over sequencing a potential mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA presaged multiple challenges to reviving the accord. Other possible obstacles discussed in connection with the talks include:

- **Iranian concerns about future U.S. action.** Iran has advocated that the United States, as part of a possible return to JCPOA compliance, guarantee that it would never again leave the accord, a condition U.S. officials describe as nonnegotiable given the inability of one Administration to legally bind its successors without a U.S.-Senate ratified treaty.[63]
- **IRGC FTO designation.** Iran has called on the United States to lift the Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) designation on the IRGC as part of any new JCPOA agreement. The IRGC was designated in 2019 under the Trump Administration, becoming the first state military institution to be so designated. When asked in July 2022 whether he would retain the IRGC's FTO designation "even if that means that it kills the deal," President Biden answered "Yes."[64]

In August 2022, reports indicated that all sides were close to achieving agreement before again stalling over Iran's reported revival of some demands that the other parties had considered closed issues.[65] Since then, U.S. officials have stated that they do not view progress toward reviving the JCPOA as likely in the near term. In October 2022, a State Department spokesperson said of nuclear talks, "That's not our focus right now" in light of ongoing protests.[66] Even as Biden Administration officials have maintained that a return to mutual compliance with the JCPOA represents the best way to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, the Administration has pursued some other courses of action related to Iran.[67] These include:

[61] Joe Biden, "There's a smarter way to be tough on Iran," CNN, September 13, 2020.

[62] Lara Jakes, "Impasse over Iran nuclear talks sets off international scramble to save accord," *New York Times*, March 11, 2021.

[63] Patrick Wintour, "US must guarantee it will not leave nuclear deal again, says Iran," *Guardian*, June 30, 2021.

[64] "US willing to kill Iran deal to keep IRGC on 'terror' list: Biden," *Al Jazeera*, July 13, 2022.

[65] Ishaan Tharoor, "Is the Iran deal worth salvaging?" *Washington Post*, August 26, 2022; "Iran nuclear talks in 'stalemate,' says EU foreign policy chief," *Arab News*, September 15, 2022.

[66] U.S. Department of State, Department Press Briefing, October 12, 2022.

[67] U.S. Department of State, Briefing with Senior Administration Officials on the Administration's efforts to advance

- **New sanctions.** The Biden Administration has not exerted any new sanctions authorities but has continued to designate for sanctions Iranian and third-country-based entities that violate existing U.S. laws and executive orders. According to a State Department spokesperson, the Biden Administration had imposed "107 sanctions" on Iran as of May 2022.[68] Numerous individuals and entities have been designated since. Newly restricted designees include individuals involved in oil smuggling networks; IRGC financial facilitators; individuals involved in Iran's UAV programs; an air transportation service provider for its role in shipping Iranian UAVs to Russia for use in Ukraine; and Iran's Morality Police.
- **Military activities.** U.S. armed forces have reportedly struck Iran-related targets in Iraq (June 2021) and Syria (February 2021, June 2021, January 2022, and August 2022) in response to attacks by Iran-backed entities on U.S. forces.[69] U.S. naval forces have interdicted or supported the interdiction of weapons shipments originating from Iran, including in December 2021 and February 2022.[70]
- **Security cooperation with other regional partners.** The Biden Administration has continued the long-standing U.S. policy of bolstering the defense capabilities of U.S. partners in the Gulf through arms sales, including an August 2022 proposed sale of 300 Patriot missiles to Saudi Arabia ($3 billion) and 96 Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missiles to the United Arab Emirates ($2.2 billion).[71] The U.S. military and its partners have also continued to conduct joint military exercises, including some seen as intended to counter Iran, and U.S. officials observed a May 2022 major Israeli military exercise.[72]

In its October 2022 National Security Strategy, the Administration laid out its policy toward Iran, stating the United States would "pursue diplomacy to ensure that Iran can never acquire a nuclear weapon, while remaining postured and prepared to use other means should diplomacy fail," and that "we will respond when our people and interests are attacked."[73] The Strategy also states, "we will always stand with the Iranian people striving for the basic rights and dignity long denied them by the regime in Tehran."

Issues for Congress

Sanctions

Since 1979, successive U.S. Administrations have imposed economic sanctions in an effort to change Iran's behavior, often at the direction of Congress.[74] U.S. sanctions on Iran were first

the free flow of information for the Iranian people, September 23, 2022.

[68] U.S. Department of State, Department Press Briefing, May 10, 2022.

[69] See for example, U.S. Central Command, "Statement regarding precision strikes in Syria," August 23, 2022.

[70] U.S. Department of State, "Illegal Iranian flow of weapons to Yemen," December 23, 2021; NAVCENT Public Affairs, "U.S. Navy destroyer supports UK seizure of Iranian missiles in Gulf of Oman," July 7, 2022.

[71] Defense Security Cooperation Agency Transmittals 22-32 and 22-26, August 2, 2022.

[72] Amos Harel, "Large U.S. army delegation in Israel reflects tighter ties, and sends a powerful message," *Haaretz*, June 24, 2022.

[73] White House, *National Security Strategy*, October 12, 2022.

[74] For details on the legislative bases for sanctions imposed on Iran, see CRS Report R43311, *Iran: U.S. Economic Sanctions and the Authority to Lift Restrictions*, by Dianne E. Rennack.

imposed during the U.S.-Iran hostage crisis of 1979-1981, in the form of executive orders issued by President Jimmy Carter blocking nearly all Iranian assets held in the United States. In 1984, Secretary of State George Schultz designated the government of Iran a state sponsor of acts of international terrorism (SSOT) following the October 1983 bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks in Lebanon by elements that later established Lebanese Hezbollah. Iran's status as an SSOT triggers several sanctions including restrictions on licenses for U.S. dual-use exports; a ban on U.S. foreign assistance, arms sales, and support in the international financial institutions; and the withholding of U.S. foreign assistance to countries that assist or sell arms to the designee (secondary sanctions).[75]

Later in the 1980s and throughout the 1990s, other U.S. sanctions sought to limit Iran's conventional arsenal and its ability to project power throughout the Middle East. In the 2000s, as Iran's nuclear program progressed, U.S. sanctions focused largely on trying to pressure Iran to limit its nuclear activities (see **Table 1**). Most of the U.S. sanctions enacted after 2010 were secondary sanctions—essentially denying U.S. market access to foreign firms that transact with major sectors of the Iranian economy, including banking, energy, and shipping. Successive Administrations issued Executive Orders under which they designated specific individuals and entities to implement and supplement the provisions of these laws. United States has also, pursuant to various authorities, imposed sanctions on a number of individuals and entities held responsible for human rights violations.

Table 1. Select Sanctions Legislation Pertaining to Iran

Legislation Name	Public Law Number	Final Votes	Target of Sanctions
The Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act of 2010 (CISADA)	P.L. 111-195, 22 U.S.C. §§8501 et seq.	Conference Report agreed to in the House 408-8 and in the Senate 99-0.	Codifies the U.S. ban on trade with and investment in Iran, first imposed by Executive Order 12959 of May 1995; imposes sanctions on foreign banks that facilitate transactions for Iranian entities.
FY2012 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA)	Section 1245(d), P.L. 112-81, 22 U.S.C. 8513a	Conference Report agreed to in the House 283-136 and in the Senate 86-13.	Imposes sanctions on banks of countries that do not reduce Iran oil imports.
Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act of 2012 (ITRSHRA)	P.L. 112-158, 22 U.S.C. §§8701 et seq.	Passed in the House 410-11; passed in the Senate with an amendment by voice vote.	Expands sanctions relating to Iran's energy sector; prohibits foreign banks from allowing Iran to withdraw its funds; imposes sanctions relating to Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and to human rights violations.
Iran Freedom and Counter-Proliferation Act (IFCA)	Sections 1244-1247, P.L. 112-239, 22 U.S.C. §§8801 et seq.	Conference Report agreed to in the House 315-107 and in the Senate 81-14.	Imposes sanctions on transactions with Iran's energy, shipping, and shipbuilding sectors, and banks that conduct transactions with sanctioned Iranian entities.

Notes: Congress grants to the President the authority to terminate most of the sanctions imposed on Iran in CISADA, ITRSHRA, and IFCA. Before terminating these sanctions, however, the President must certify that the government of Iran has ceased its engagement in the two critical areas of terrorism and weapons, as set forth in Section 401 of CISADA, as amended.

[75] CRS Report R43835, *State Sponsors of Acts of International Terrorism—Legislative Parameters: In Brief*, by Dianne E. Rennack.

Impact of sanctions. U.S. sanctions imposed during 2011-2015, and since 2018, have taken a substantial toll on Iran's economy. A UN official, in a May 2022 visit to Iran, said that economic sanctions had increased inflation and poverty, exacerbating overall humanitarian conditions.[76] Another UN official said in a 2021 report that Iran's ability to respond to the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic was in part affected by U.S. sanctions and their impact on the Iranian economy, though humanitarian items including medicine and medical supplies are exempt from U.S. sanctions.[77] Some analysts, while agreeing that sanctions have an impact, also have argued that Iran suffers from "decades of failed economic policies."[78] The CIA World Factbook states, "Distortions—including corruption, price controls, subsidies, and a banking system holding billions of dollars of non-performing loans—weigh down the economy."[79]

Sanctions appear to have had a mixed impact on the range of Iranian behaviors their imposition has been intended to curb. As mentioned above, many experts attribute Iran's decision to enter into multilateral negotiations and agree to limits on its nuclear program under the JCPOA at least in part to sanctions pressure. Many other aspects of Iranian policy seen as threatening to U.S. interests, including its regional influence and military capabilities, appear to remain considerable and have arguably increased in the last decade.[80]

Since the reimposition of U.S. sanctions in 2018 and resulting economic pressure, Iran has decreased its compliance with the nuclear commitments of the JCPOA and conducted provocations in the Persian Gulf and in Iraq. Those nuclear advances and regional provocations have continued as Iran and the United States have engaged with other JCPOA signatories in indirect negotiations around reviving the JCPOA. Some analysts connect the reimposition of U.S. sanctions after 2018 to Iran's growing closeness to China (with which Iran signed a March 2021 agreement to deepen economic and security ties)[81] and Russia. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in early 2022, Russia and Iran—both under U.S. sanctions—have explored expanding bilateral and energy cooperation.[82] Both China and Russia are signatories to the JCPOA.

As part of its oversight responsibilities and to better inform legislative action, Congress has directed successive Administrations to provide numerous reports on a wide array of Iran-related topics, including U.S. sanctions. In FY2022 legislation, they include reports on the "status of United States bilateral sanctions on Iran" (Sec. 7041(b)(2)(B) of FY2022 Consolidated Appropriations Act, P.L. 117-103) and the impact of sanctions on various Iranian entities and Iran-backed groups (Sec. 1227 of the FY2022 National Defense Authorization Act, P.L. 117-81). Congress has also held numerous hearings focused primarily or in part on U.S. sanctions on Iran.

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[76] Golnaz Esfandiari, "Visit to Iran by controversial UN rapporteur provokes concerns," *RFE/RL*, May 13, 2022; Amir Vahdat, "UN envoy: US sanctions on Iran worsen humanitarian situation," ABC News, May 18, 2022;

[77] United Nations General Assembly, *Situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, A/HRC/26/50, January 11, 2021; Office of Foreign Assets Control, Iran General License N-1, June 10, 2022.

[78] Anthony Cordesman, "The Crisis in Iran: What Now?" Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 11, 2018.

[79] CIA World Factbook, "Iran," updated September 28, 2022.

[80] See, for example, "New report reveals extent of Iran's growing Middle East influence," *Al Jazeera*, November 7, 2019; Ariane Tabatabai et al., "Iran's Military Interventions: Patterns, Drivers, and Signposts," RAND Corporation, 2021; David Gardner, "Curbing Iran's regional ambitions remains a distant hope for the west," *Financial Times*, June 10, 2021; Philip Loft, "Iran's influence in the Middle East," House of Commons Library (UK Parliament), March 23, 2022.

[81] "China, With $400 Billion Iran Deal, Could Deepen Influence in Mideast," *New York Times*, March 27, 2021.

[82] "Russia's Lavrov in Iran to Discuss Nuclear Deal, Cooperation," *Reuters*, June 22, 2022.

Oversight of Nuclear Talks/Agreement

Congress has sought to influence the outcome and implementation of international negotiations over Iran's nuclear program. In 2015, Congress enacted the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act (INARA, P.L. 114-17), which mandates congressional review of related agreements and provides for consideration of legislation to potentially block their implementation.[83]

Among other provisions, INARA directs the President to submit to Congress within five calendar days of reaching "an agreement with Iran relating to the nuclear program of Iran" that agreement and a certification that it meets certain conditions, such as that the agreement ensures that Iran will not be permitted to use its nuclear program for military purposes. It also provides Congress with a 30-day period following transmittal to review the agreement, during which the President may not waive or otherwise limit sanctions; if Congress enacts a resolution of disapproval during that period, the executive branch may not take any "action involving any measure of statutory sanctions relief."

Indirect negotiations over potentially reviving the JCPOA (see above) have implications for INARA. The Biden Administration would likely be required to report any JCPOA amendments to Congress, triggering the congressional review process described above, but it remains unclear whether reentering the JCPOA (which seems a diminished prospect in late 2022) would do so.[84] For their part, Biden Administration officials have stated publicly that they are "committed to ensuring the requirements of INARA are fully satisfied" without engaging on the question of whether they would submit a hypothetical agreement for congressional review.[85] Many observers consider it likely that deal opponents would be able to muster majorities against a potential agreement but would again fall short of veto-proof majorities to block its implementation, as they did in 2015.[86]

Some in Congress who oppose Biden Administration efforts to revive the JCPOA have indicated that they might use INARA to block or at least complicate a potential future agreement. Several dozen senators wrote to President Biden in February 2022 urging him to submit any agreement for congressional review.[87] Those same senators and several others wrote again to President Biden in March 2022 reiterating that message and expressing opposition to any agreement that does not constrain Iran's nuclear program, its ballistic missile activities, and its support for international terrorism.[88] Some Members have also introduced legislation to condition potential U.S. entry into an agreement on IAEA inspectors having full access to Iranian nuclear facilities (H.R. 1203); on the Administration's commitment to submit the agreement for approval by the Senate as a treaty (S. 1205/H.R. 1479); or on the President's submission of the agreement as a treaty (S. 2030).

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[83] For a legislative history of INARA, and the several votes taken in Congress that demonstrated opposition to the JCPOA but failed to block its implementation, see CRS Report R46796, *Congress and the Middle East, 2011-2020: Selected Case Studies*, coordinated by Christopher M. Blanchard.

[84] CRS Report R46663, *Possible U.S. Return to Iran Nuclear Agreement: Frequently Asked Questions*, by Kenneth Katzman et al.

[85] State Department Press Briefing, March 16, 2022.

[86] See, for example, Dan De Luce, "Biden is betting Republican senators lack votes to derail revival of Iran nuclear deal," *NBC News*, March 2, 2022; Patricia Zengerle and Arshad Mohammed, "Analysis: U.S. Congress may squawk over a new Iran deal but is unlikely to block it," Reuters, February 17, 2022.

[87] "Sen. Cruz leads letter with 32 colleagues to President Biden, commits to blocking implementation of any Iran deal not submitted to Congress for approval," Senator Ted Cruz, February 8, 2022.

[88] "49 Senate Republicans tell President Biden: An agreement without broad congressional support will not survive," Senator James M. Inhofe, March 14, 2022.

Other proposed measures would create congressional review and disapproval procedures similar to those of INARA for the lifting of any sanctions on Iran (S. 488/H.R. 1699). Other Members have issued public statements or introduced legislation in support of the Biden Administration's diplomatic efforts to revive the JCPOA.[89]

Authorizing or Prohibiting the Use of Force

Since 2019, Congress has several times asserted its constitutional war powers in relation to Iran. During periods when armed confrontations have raised the prospect of a wider military conflict, these efforts to constrain the executive have generally taken the form of legislation stating that the use of force against Iran is not authorized. Congress has not, however, taken action to restrain the President's ability to deploy U.S. armed forces that have at times engaged in hostilities with Iranian or Iran-backed forces outside of Iranian territory.

Congress has regularly included in Iran-related legislation language stating that "nothing in the Act shall be construed as authorizing the use of force against Iran" (e.g., Section 301 of the Iran Freedom Support Act, P.L. 109-293, or Section 604 of the Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act of 2012, P.L. 112-158). Congress has also included similar language in several defense authorization acts (going back to FY2013, P.L. 112-239, and most recently in FY2019, P.L. 115-232). In the 117th Congress, similar language is included in Section 8128 of the Department of Defense Appropriations Act, 2022 (Division C of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2022; P.L. 117-103).

The rise in U.S.-Iran tensions in summer 2019, and assertions from then-President Trump that he possessed the authority to initiate military action against Iran without prior congressional approval, prompted some congressional action.[90] In Section 1229 of the draft FY2020 NDAA (H.R. 2500, passed by the House in July 2019), the House approved legislation that would have prohibited the use of funds for military force against Iran in the absence of a congressional declaration of war or other statutory authorization. The Senate voted not to add similar language (S.Amdt. 883) to its version of the bill, and the House-passed prohibition was not included in conference text of the bill.

The January 2020 U.S. killing of IRGC-QF commander Qasem Soleimani again prompted some Members of Congress to introduce legislation to constrain the President's ability to use force against Iran, including H.Con.Res. 83 (pursuant to Section 5(c) of the War Powers Resolution; adopted by the House) and S.J.Res. 68 (pursuant to 50 USC sec 1546a; adopted by the Senate and House and vetoed by President Trump).[91]

Debates over U.S. military action against Iranian and Iran-backed forces, notably those in Iraq, also involve the 2002 Authorization for the Use of Military Force (2002 AUMF, P.L. 107-243). Biden Administration officials have voiced support for efforts by some Members to repeal that legislation, citing the President's Article II power to defend U.S. forces from attack as sufficient to respond to threats from Iran. Some Members have voiced concern about the practical impacts

[89] See, for example, S. 434 and Senator Chris Murphy, "Murphy: After four years of failed maximum pressure in Iran, we know we're better off with a nuclear agreement," September 22, 2022.

[90] Saagar Enjeti and Jordan Fabian, "EXCLUSIVE: Trump: I do not need congressional approval to strike Iran," *The Hill*, June 24, 2019.

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

of repealing the 2002 AUMF without a revised authorization and argued that doing so would send the wrong message to Iran and the region.[92]

Outlook and Congressional Options

Congress has long played an active role in overseeing U.S. policy toward Iran, whose actions constitute one of the most persistent challenges to U.S. interests. While successive Administrations have characterized Iran's nuclear program as the most serious challenge posed by Iran to U.S. interests, attention to efforts to revive the JCPOA appear to have dimmed in 2022 in light of nationwide unrest in Iran and other obstacles.

President Biden has said, "Iran will never get a nuclear weapon on my watch," and Administration officials have told Congress that a negotiated settlement akin to the JCPOA is the best way to achieve that goal.[93] While they maintain that all U.S. options remain available, Administration officials also argue that it is not possible to resolve the challenge of Iran's nuclear program militarily.[94] During the Biden Administration, no Member of Congress appears to have publicly supported military action to reduce Iran's nuclear capabilities. Some Members have, however, called for the United States to, as Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Robert Menendez advocated in May 2022, demonstrate that "we have the will, as well as military capabilities if absolutely necessary, to defend our people and our interests" with regard to Iran.[95] JCPOA opponents in Congress often advocate for increased U.S. military exercises with and arms sales to regional partners as ways to increase deterrence.[96]

Members of Congress expressed a range of views in anticipation of an agreement. Some congressional supporters of the JCPOA urged President Biden in 2021 to seek to restore the accord.[97] Many in Congress who opposed the JCPOA in 2015 maintain their opposition to the accord, with some questioning the feasibility of negotiating with Iran at all.[98] For their part, as of fall 2022, Biden Administration officials assert that they are not focused on reviving the accord.[99]

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[92] Senate Foreign Relations Holds Hearing on Use of Force Authorizations, CQ Congressional Transcripts, August 3, 2021.

[93] White House, Remarks by President Biden and President Rivlin of the State of Israel Before Bilateral Meeting, Jun 28, 2021; Senate Foreign Relations Committee Holds Hearing on US-Iran Policy, CQ Congressional Transcripts, May 25, 2022.

[94] Senate Foreign Relations Committee Holds Hearing on US-Iran Policy, CQ Congressional Transcripts, May 25, 2022.

[95] SFRC Chairman Menendez opening remarks at hearing on JCPOA negotiations and United States policy on Iran moving forward," Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman's Press, May 25, 2022. See also Senate Foreign Relations Committee Holds Hearing on US-Iran Policy, CQ Congressional Transcripts, May 25, 2022.

[96] "Ranking Member Risch opening statement at hearing on the JCPOA negotiations and Iran policy," U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations Ranking Member's Press, May 25, 2022.

[97] "Kaine, Murphy & colleagues urge President Biden to return to Iran nuclear agreement under a compliance for compliance approach," Senator Tim Kaine, April 13, 2021.

[98] "Chairman Menendez: We cannot allow Iran to threaten us into a bad deal or an interim agreement that allows it to continue building its nuclear capacity," U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations Chairman's Press, February 1, 2022; "Ranking Member Risch opening statement at hearing on the JCPOA negotiations and Iran policy," U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations Ranking Member's Press, May 25, 2022; Omri Nahmias, "Rep. Gottheimer to 'Post': 'We shouldn't allow Iran to threaten the US,'" *Jerusalem Post*, March 16, 2021; "Risch: Mr. President, stop doing business with the Russians, walk away from Iran deal," Senate Committee on Foreign Relations Ranking Member's Press, March 9, 2022.

[99] See, for example, On-the-record press gaggle by NSC Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby, October 20, 2022; Jennifer Hansler, "US Iran envoy says he is focused on 'where we can be useful' and not going to 'waste our time' on nuclear deal right now," *CNN*, October 31, 2022.

Iran's provision of weaponry to Russia for use in Ukraine may be one factor related to this shift in focus away from the JCPOA, but it appears that the government's crackdown on protests in Iran is the dominant factor. Members of Congress may oversee and seek to shape U.S. policy responses to the protests, though there may be limits to Congress's ability to shape events themselves.[100] Dozens of Members have cosponsored resolutions that would commend the demonstrators, condemn the Iranian government's violent repression, and urge the Biden Administration to continue to designate for sanctions Iranian entities involved in the crackdown.[101] Some Members have also called on the Administration to "make needed changes to enhance the free flow of information in Iran."[102] Finally, some activists and JCPOA opponents have called on the Biden Administration to formally terminate negotiations around reviving the accord, a step Biden Administration officials are reportedly resistant to take even as they emphasize that those negotiations are moribund and no longer a focus of U.S. efforts.[103]

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Disclaimer

[100] John Irish and Arshad Mohammed, "Analysis: Beyond cutting hair and rhetoric, little West can do to change Iran's trajectory," *Reuters*, October 20, 2022.

[101] S.Res. 803; H.Res. 1397; S.Con.Res. 47; and H.Con.Res. 110.

[102] October 8, 2022, letter to Secretary Antony Blinken and Secretary Janet Yellen from 21 Representatives.

[103] See, for example, Sen. Mike Lee, Rep. Chris Stewart, and Khosrow Semnani, "America should send a powerful message to Iran by terminating nuclear negotiations," *The Hill*, November 1, 2022; Nahal Toosi, "'Everyone thinks we have magic powers': Biden seeks a balance on Iran," *Politico*, October 25, 2022.