

Iran Update



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

Click [here](#) to see CTP and ISW's interactive map of Israeli ground operations, and [here](#) to see CTP and ISW's interactive map of the ongoing opposition offensive in Syria. These maps are updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

We do not report in detail on war crimes because these activities are well-covered in Western media and do not directly affect the military operations we are assessing and forecasting. We utterly condemn violations of the laws of armed conflict and the Geneva Conventions and crimes against humanity even though we do not describe them in these reports.

NOTE: *CTP-ISW will produce the update Monday through Friday beginning February 20, 2025, due to the decrease in military activity in the Gaza Strip and Lebanon and the defeats of Hamas and Hezbollah. We will resume daily, seven-day coverage if circumstances change. CTP-ISW will notify our readers when we resume seven-day coverage. CTP-ISW will continue to produce daily Syria maps. We will publish weekend Syria maps on Mondays. We will cover and assess Axis of Resistance activities in the Palestinian territories and Lebanon at a less granular level moving forward. We will continue to publish analysis on other key US interests in the region, such as the defeat of ISIS and Syrian stability. We will also continue to adjust our Middle Eastern coverage and make those adjustments clear in response to regional dynamics and priorities, just as we did immediately after Hamas' October 7 attack into Israel and the fall of the Assad Regime.*

Key Takeaways:

- **Iranian Rhetoric:** Brigadier General Ebrahim Jabbari—adviser to the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) commander—threatened to attack "all [US] bases and ships in the region" during a speech at the Great Prophet 19 military exercise on February 20.
- **Hayat Tahrir al Sham and Syrian Democratic Forces Negotiations:** Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) commander Mazloum Abdi said that he and Syrian Interim President Ahmed al Shara agreed on "general principles" but still disagree on "practical details," which likely refers to the integration of the SDF into the Syrian army.

- **Syrian Constitution:** The Syrian Preparatory Committee continued “dialogue sessions” for Raqqa, Hasakah, and Rif Dimashq provinces in Damascus on February 21.
- **Iraqi Politics:** The United States reportedly threatened to sanction the Iraqi federal government if it prevents the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) from resuming oil exports.

Syria

Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) commander Mazloum Abdi said that he and Syrian Interim President Ahmed al Shara agreed on “general principles” but still disagreed on “practical details,” which likely refers to the integration of the SDF into the Syrian army.[1] Abdi told *The Guardian* on February 21 that he and Shara agreed to keep Syria unified during the leaders’ last meeting in early January.[2] Abdi said that he and Shara still disagree on the “practical details,” including “the tools for us to work together” and the “timeline.”[3] Abdi is likely referring to the specific mechanisms for SDF integration into the Syrian army. An SDF commander said on February 18 that the SDF and the governing body in northeast Syria agreed to merge their forces into the Syrian Defense Ministry.[4] Abdi has not yet publicly confirmed such an agreement. Abdi’s demand that the SDF integrate as a “bloc” was one of the main sticking points of negotiations in the past two months, and it is unclear if either side has moderated their demands on this issue. Abdi also told *The Guardian* that the “Turkish intervention” was hurting negotiations.[5] CTP-ISW has previously noted that Abdi is unlikely to give up the SDF’s ability to defend Kurdish areas against active attacks by Turkey and the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA).[6]

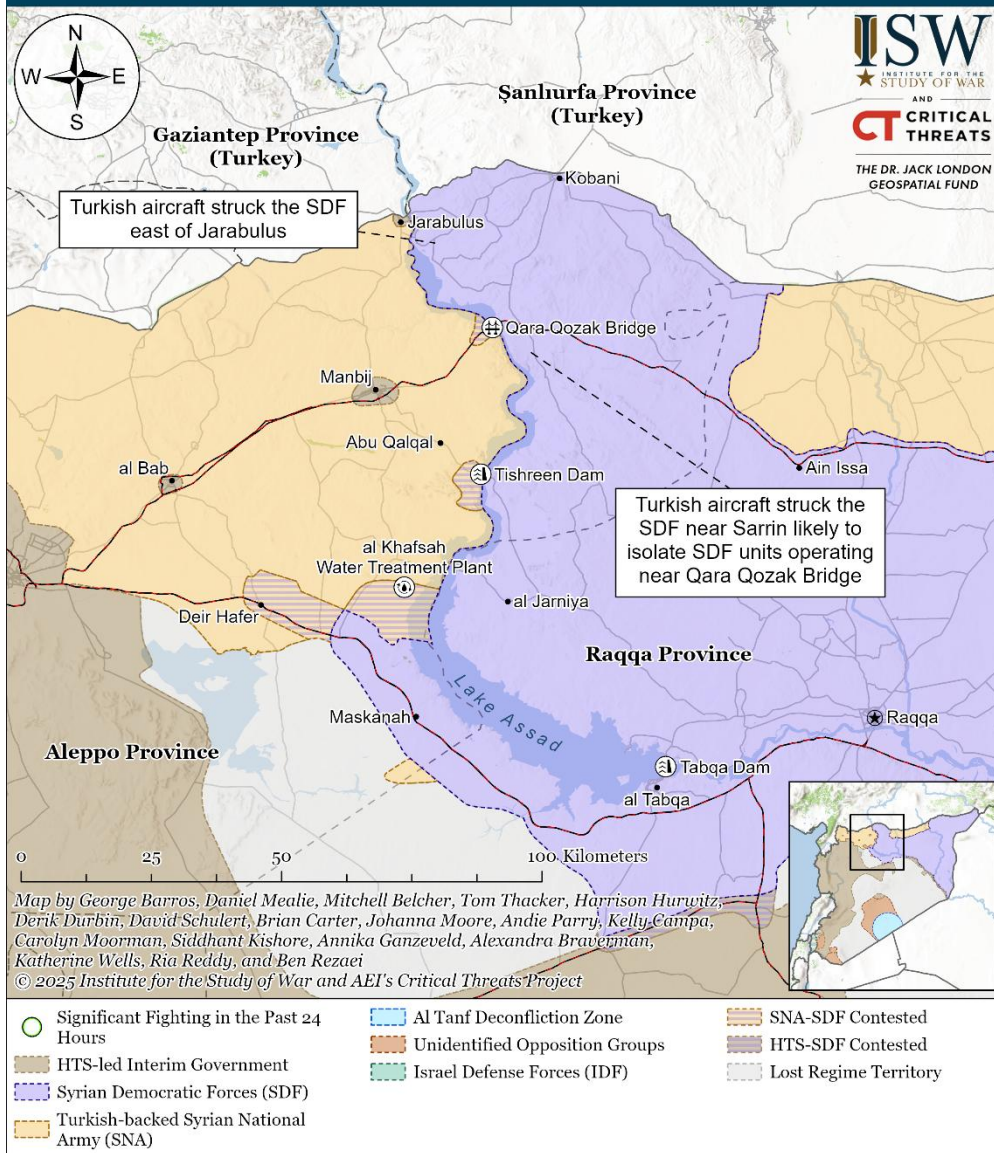
Turkish aircraft struck the SDF along the eastern bank of the Euphrates River on February 21. Turkish aircraft struck SDF positions east of Jarabulus.[7] Turkey has repeatedly struck SDF positions across the Euphrates River from Jarabulus since February 12.[8]

Turkey continued to strike SDF positions near Qara Qozak Bridge on February 21. Turkish aircraft struck several SDF positions near Sarrin, likely to isolate SDF units at the bridgehead west of the Qara Qozak Bridge.[9]

Anti-SDF media claimed that Turkish drones struck an SDF checkpoint near al Kasrat, south of Raqqa, on February 21.[10]

The Turkish Defense Ministry announced on February 21 that it killed 8 “PKK” fighters in northwestern Syria.[11] Turkey routinely conducts strikes targeting the “PKK” in northern Iraq and Syria, but it commonly conflates the PKK and the SDF.

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The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) conducted airstrikes targeting Hezbollah supply routes along the Syria-Lebanon border on February 20.[12] Local Syrian media reported that the airstrikes struck Wadi Khaled in northeastern Lebanon.[13]

Syrian media reported that the US-led international coalition conducted a drone strike targeting a vehicle in al Dana, northern Idlib Province, on February 21.[14] The drone strike reportedly killed a former Hurras al Din member.[15] US Central Command (CENTCOM) has not confirmed any drone strikes in Syria at the time of this writing.

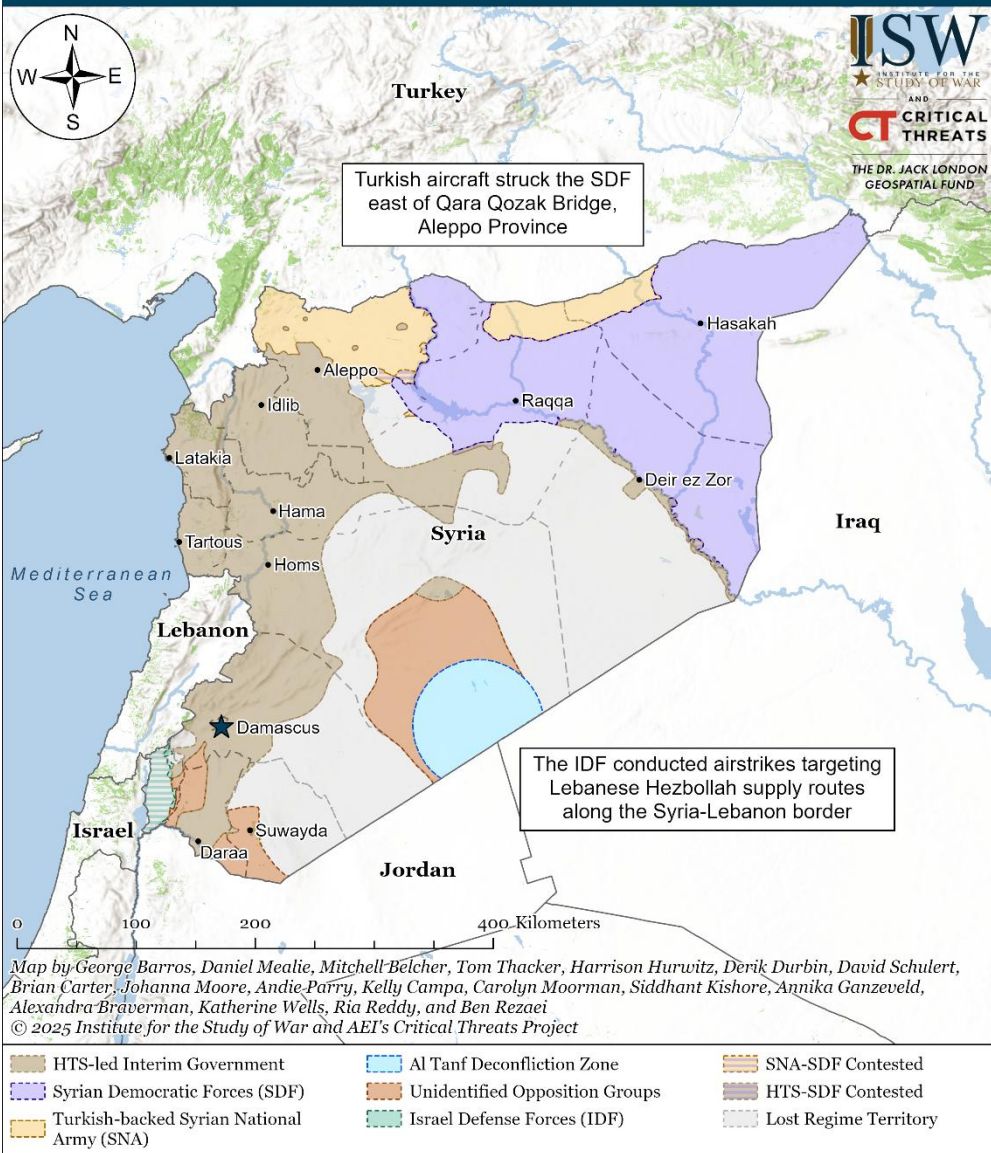
The Syrian Preparatory Committee continued “dialogue sessions” for Raqqa, Hasakah, and Rif Dimashq provinces in Damascus on February 21.[16] The Preparatory Committee has held sessions over the past several days in Damascus and provincial capitals to help the interim

government "develop an integrated action plan" for the National Dialogue Conference.[17] This conference will reportedly facilitate the drafting of a new Syrian constitution.[18] The Syrian Preparatory Committee began "dialogue sessions" for Raqqa and Hasakah provinces in Damascus on February 20, in which some participants expressed anti-Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) views.[19] Preparatory Committee member and Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS)-affiliated Muhammad Mastat stated that the Raqqa dialogue session took place in Damascus due to SDF "threats, repression and silence against the people of [Raqqa] province." [20] These dialogue sessions are taking place about a week before the March 1, 2025, internal deadline that HTS set for itself to form a transitional government.[21]

People's Republic of China (PRC) Ambassador to Syria Shi Hongwei met with Syrian Interim President Ahmed al Shara and Syrian Interim Foreign Minister Asaad al Shaibani in Damascus on February 21.[22] This is the Syrian interim government's first public meeting with PRC officials since the fall of the Assad regime. Official Syrian readouts did not specify what the officials discussed. The PRC delegation possibly raised concerns about the influence of the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) and associated Uyghur militant groups within the Syrian interim government, as PRC officials have recently expressed public alarm about Syria's appointment of Uyghurs associated with TIP to high ranks within the Syrian army.[23] Shara's government is unlikely to give al Qaeda-affiliated groups, such as TIP, outsized influence within the interim government in the near term, however. Such actions could risk scuttling Shara's efforts to portray the government as a moderate force in order to obtain sanctions relief from Western countries.

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Iraq

Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Strengthen Iranian and Axis of Resistance influence over the Iraqi state and society
- Harden the Iraqi government against internal dissent

The United States reportedly threatened to sanction the Iraqi federal government if it prevented the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) from resuming oil exports.[24] Unspecified sources told Reuters on February 21 that KRG oil exports would offset the halt in Iranian oil exports and keep oil prices low while the United States imposes maximum pressure sanctions on Iran.[25] The KRG exporting oil through global markets legally would curb crude oil

smuggling from Iraqi Kurdistan to Iran.[26] Iraqi Oil Minister Hayan Abdel Ghani announced on February 17 that the KRG will resume exporting oil by February 24.[27] Unspecified sources speaking to Reuters claimed that Abdel Ghani's announcement was a direct result of the US threats to implement sanctions.

Turkey continued to attack the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Iraqi Kurdistan on February 21.[28] Iraqi media reported that Turkish forces killed three PKK fighters during clashes in Kohrezi and Balafa, Duhok Province.[29] The Turkish Defense Ministry announced on February 21 that it has killed 12 PKK fighters in northern Iraq.[30]

Interim Syrian Foreign Affairs Minister Asaad al Shaibani postponed his visit to Iraq for the third time due to “security reasons,” according to an unspecified source speaking to Iraqi media on February 21.[31] Shaibani was scheduled to visit Iraq on February 22. Some members of the Shia Coordination Framework, including State of Law Coalition head Nouri al Maliki, oppose Iraqi federal government efforts to develop relations with the HTS-led Syrian interim government.[32]

Members of the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) 26th Brigade (Al Abbas Division) protested in Muthanna City, Muthanna Province, on February 21 to demand their reinstatement in the PMF.[33] The 26th Brigade is a tribal militia that is affiliated with Grand Ayatollah Ali al Sistani.[34] The PMF 26th Brigade criticized the Iraqi parliament on February 4 for delaying the passage of the PMF Law, which would force some PMF commanders and leaders to retire due to their age.[35] The PMF 26th Brigade proposed an amendment to the law on February 16 to exempt individuals who “returned to serve” from the age requirements stipulated in the law.[36]

Iraqi media separately reported that unspecified PMF members who were dismissed from the PMF in 2017 held a protest in Babil Province.[37] The protesters demanded their reinstatement in the PMF. Iraqi media reported that the protesters were dismissed in 2017 due to “administrative and financial” reasons.[38]

Arabian Peninsula

Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Harden the Houthi regime against internal dissent in Houthi-controlled areas
- Destroy the anti-Houthi opposition in order to control all of Yemen
- Erode Israeli will to continue the war in the Gaza Strip

Nothing significant to report.

The Palestinian Territories and Lebanon

Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Erode the will of the Israeli political establishment and public to sustain clearing operations in the Gaza Strip
- Reestablish Hamas as the governing authority in the Gaza Strip
- Rebuild and reestablish Hezbollah in southern Lebanon
- Establish the West Bank as a viable front against Israel

Lebanese Hezbollah is trying to use former Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah's funeral in Beirut on February 23 to demonstrate its continued popularity and strength in Lebanon.[39] A Hezbollah parliamentarian claimed on February 20 that two million people will attend the funeral.[40] Fadallah argued that the expected crowd size for Nasrallah's funeral is a sign of Hezbollah's increasing popularity. Hezbollah's support base has reportedly grown frustrated over delayed war compensation following the conflict with Israel.[41] Hezbollah invited the head of the Lebanese Free Patriotic Movement, Gerban Bassil, after the group expressed its willingness to mend ties after the Lebanese Free Patriotic Movement had distanced itself from Hezbollah.[42] The Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesperson claimed that Nasrallah's funeral will be the "resurrection of the resistance." [43] Hezbollah-affiliated parliamentarian Hassan Fadallah claimed on February 21 that Hezbollah has repaired its command structure at the "organizational and field levels." [44] Hezbollah is currently regenerating and reorganizing its forces after a nearly two-month Israeli campaign in southern Lebanon that has severely degraded its command-and-control networks, communications, and weapons stockpiles.[45]

The Lebanese government's draft ministerial statement naming the government's priorities on February 17 did not include language that justifies Hezbollah's armed presence outside of Lebanese state control.[46] The draft statement will be presented to the Lebanese parliament for approval on February 25-26.[47]

Iranian Decision-Making, Internal Dynamics, and Foreign Policy

Iranian Armed Forces General Staff Chief Major General Mohammad Bagheri met with Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) Secretary General Ziad al Nakhalah in Tehran on February 20.[48] Bagheri said that Iran has never stopped supporting Palestine and the Axis of Resistance and will continue to do so.

Brigadier General Ebrahim Jabbari—adviser to the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) commander—threatened to attack "all [US] bases and ships in the region" during a speech at the Great Prophet 19 military exercise on February 20.[49] Jabbari said that Iran would conduct a third True Promise attack against Israel and "destroy Tel Aviv and Haifa." [50] Jabbari's statements echo recent statements from senior IRGC commanders threatening to conduct another missile attack on Israel.[51] CTP-ISW previously assessed that IRGC commanders have likely resurfaced these threats in recent days to try to deter an Israeli attack on Iran and to reassure the Iranian population that the IRGC would respond to any attack on Iran.

Senior Iranian officials have continued to reiterate their desire for “resistance” militias to form in Syria and oppose the interim government. Iranian Supreme National Security Council Secretary Ali Akbar Ahmadian stated on February 21 that Israel occupied Syria as the result of a failed campaign in the Gaza Strip, and the “occupation” of Syria would lead to the emergence of a new resistance.[52] Senior Iranian officials, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, suggested in recent months that Syrian youth should arm and mobilize against the interim government.[53] Khamenei said in December 2024 that zealous Syrian youth would liberate "occupied areas" of Syria, drawing a parallel to Iraqi youth who, with support and direction from the IRGC Quds Force, attacked and killed hundreds of US service members between 2003 and 2011.[54]

The Iranian rial remained valued at 930,700 rials to one US dollar on February 21.[55]

The Iran Update provides insights into Iranian and Iranian-sponsored activities abroad that undermine regional stability and threaten US forces and interests. It also covers events and trends that affect the stability and decision-making of the Iranian regime. The Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute and the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) provides these updates regularly based on regional events.

CTP-ISW defines the “Axis of Resistance” as the unconventional alliance that Iran has cultivated in the Middle East since the Islamic Republic came to power in 1979. This transnational coalition is comprised of state, semi-state, and non-state actors that cooperate to secure their collective interests. Tehran considers itself to be both part of the alliance and its leader. Iran furnishes these groups with varying levels of financial, military, and political support in exchange for some degree of influence or control over their actions. Some are traditional proxies that are highly responsive to Iranian direction, while others are partners over which Iran exerts more limited influence. Members of the Axis of Resistance are united by their grand strategic objectives, which include eroding and eventually expelling American influence from the Middle East, destroying the Israeli state, or both. Pursuing these objectives and supporting the Axis of Resistance to those ends have become cornerstones of Iranian regional strategy.

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