

# Iran Update



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**Information Cutoff: February 28, 2025, 2:00 pm ET**

*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.*

**Iran and China continue to cooperate to circumvent US sanctions. At least eight tankers have participated in ship-to-ship transfers to move Iranian oil to China in recent weeks.**[1] These transfers reflect the “dark fleet” of vessels that Iran uses to move oil through Malaysian waters to China.[2] Iran was reportedly holding around 16.82 million barrels of oil in floating storage facilities in December 2024, with two-thirds of these barrels based off the eastern Malaysian coast.[3] Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian met with the Malaysian foreign minister in Tehran on February 25.[4] Iran depends heavily on revenues from energy sales to support its economy. China continues to import Iranian oil because of its cheap cost, despite China signaling that it is adhering to US sanctions by banning sanctioned tankers from Shandong Province ports.[5] China wants low energy costs to maintain competitiveness in its manufacturing industry.

**Lebanese airport authorities seized 2.5 million US dollars in cash on February 28 that a man attempted to smuggle from Turkey to Lebanon for Hezbollah, likely on Iran's behalf.**[6] This incident follows an uptick in Iranian money smuggling efforts to Hezbollah via air routes in recent months. Israel reported in January 2025 that Turkish citizens have been involved in efforts to smuggle cash from Istanbul to Beirut for Hezbollah.[7] Lebanon reportedly indefinitely suspended landing rights for Iranian airlines flying to Beirut on February 13.[8] Commercially available flight tracking data revealed only two instances of Iranian flights landing in Beirut since February 11.

The suspension of Iranian landing rights to Lebanon could explain why Iran may now rely on money smuggling routes from Turkey.

### **Key Takeaways:**

- **Iran:** Iran and China continue to cooperate to circumvent US sanctions. At least eight tankers have participated in ship-to-ship transfers to move Iranian oil to China in recent weeks.
- **Lebanon:** Lebanese airport authorities seized 2.5 million US dollars in cash that a man tried to smuggle from Turkey to Lebanon for Hezbollah, likely on Iran's behalf.

### **Syria**

**Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) clarified that it would not negotiate with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) despite PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan's call for disarmament.**[9] It is unclear what Ocalan, who is imprisoned in Turkey, expects to gain from calling for the PKK's dissolution and disarmament given the AKP position. The AKP refusal to negotiate may dissuade some PKK branches from following Ocalan's call to disarm.

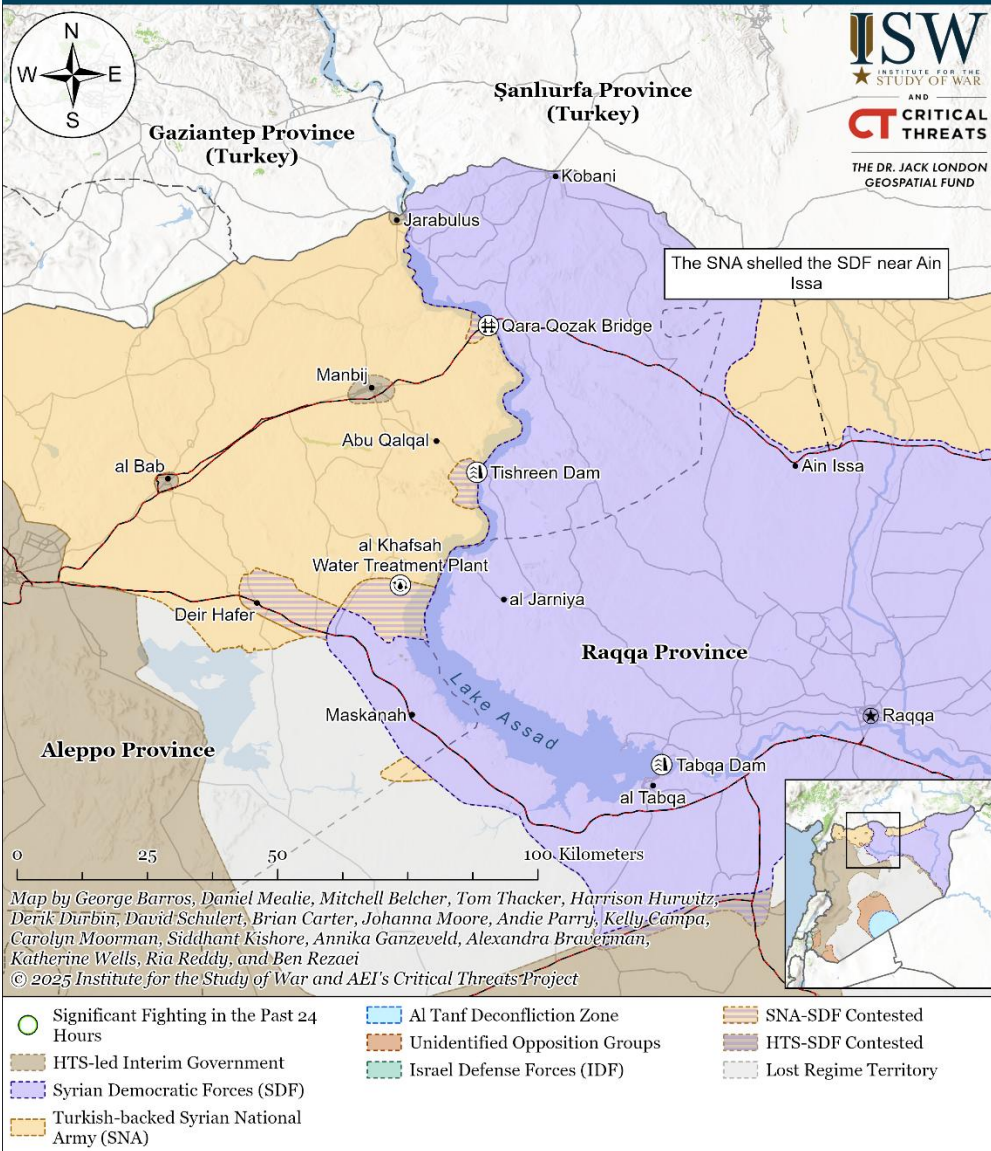
**AKP spokesperson Omer Celik said that the AKP expects the PKK-linked Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) in Syria to dissolve.**[10] The YPG is the military arm of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which dominates the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Turkey often conflates the SDF and YPG with the PKK and uses "PKK" to refer to the entire SDF. SDF Commander Mazloum Abdi rejected the idea that Ocalan's call for disarmament applies to the SDF in Syria on February 27.[11] Abdi, who is a relative moderate within the SDF, has verbally agreed to eject foreign PKK fighters from Syria.[12] The AKP statement suggests that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan will not be satisfied with this concession from Abdi, however. Turkish officials previously signaled that they believed a call to the PKK from Ocalan to disarm and dissolve would pressure the SDF into agreeing to disarm and integrate into the Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS)-led interim government.[13]

**Even minority Kurdish parties in Syria are rejecting the idea that Ocalan's call applies to Syria.** The moderate and non-PKK affiliated Kurdish National Council (KNC) General Secretariat released a statement that welcomed Ocalan's call to abandon armed resistance but centered the possibility of change on Turkey rather than Syria.[14] The statement called Ocalan's announcement "a real opportunity to end the violence and adopt political struggle and peaceful solutions to resolve the Kurdish issue in Türkiye." [15] This prioritization of Turkey mirrors Abdi's interpretation that Ocalan's statement "is only for the PKK [and is not] related to us in Syria." [16] The KNC has little to no ability to influence the SDF's choice to disarm. It is notable nonetheless that the group agrees with the SDF's interpretation that Ocalan's call applies only to Turkey.

**Turkey and the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) have continued to strike SDF positions since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on February 27.** The SNA shelled SDF positions near Ain Issa, north of Raqqa, on February 27 and February 28.[17] Turkish drones struck SDF positions near al Tarwaziya, north of Raqqa, on February 27.[18] Anti-SDF media separately reported SDF movements around SNA-held territory on February 27.[19]

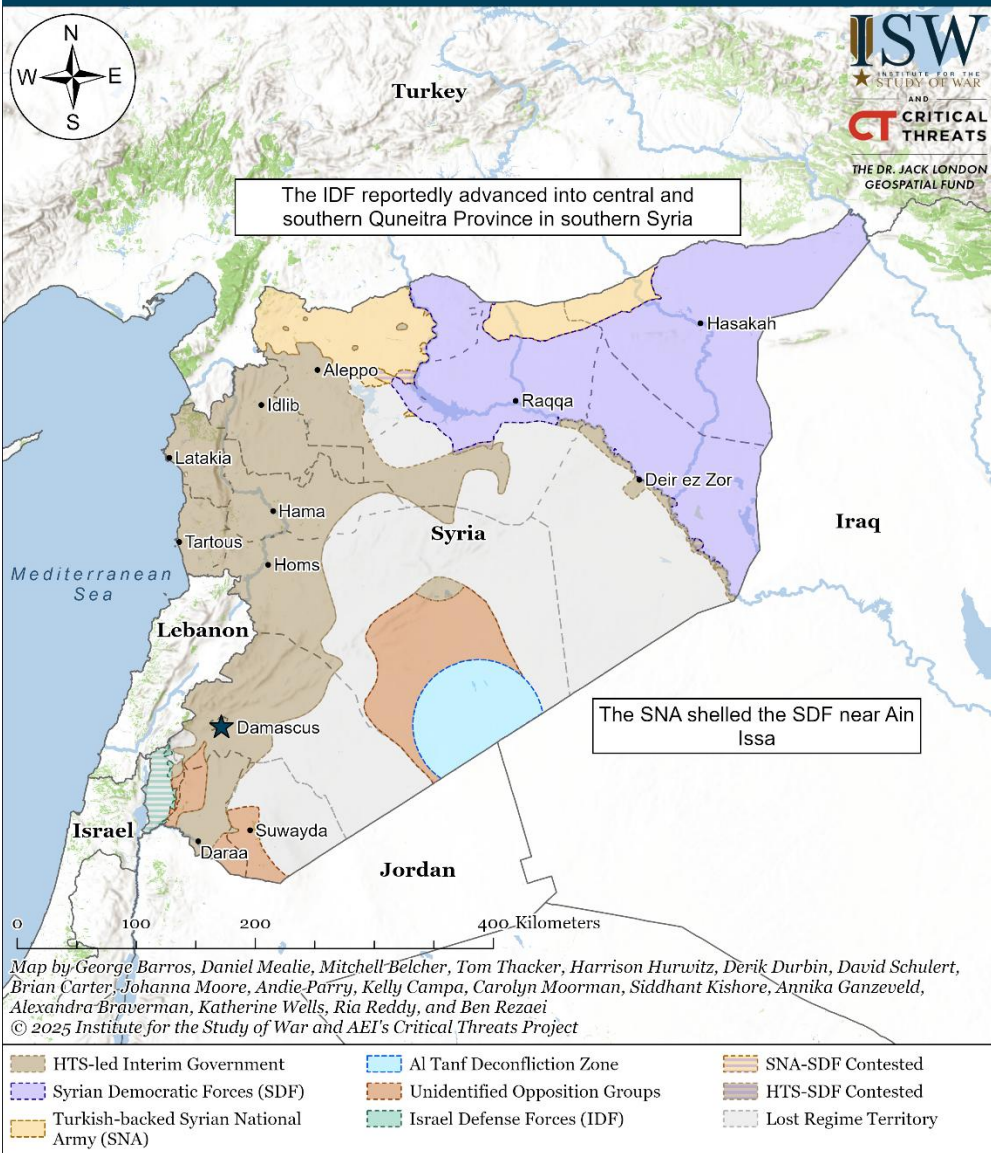
# Assessed Control of Terrain around Manbij

February 28, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



# Assessed Control of Terrain in Syria

February 28, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



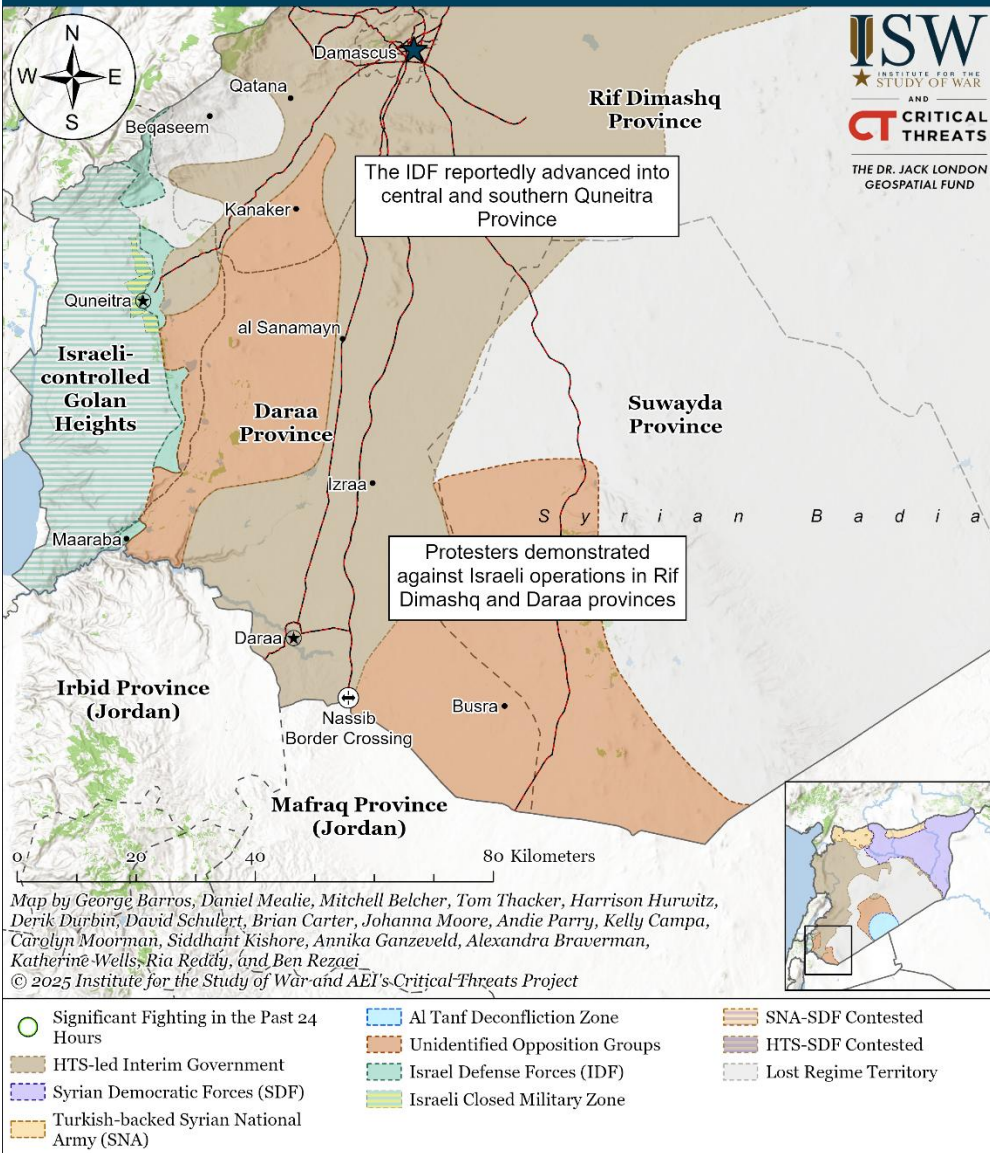
Map by George Barros, Daniel Mealie, Mitchell Belcher, Tom Thacker, Harrison Hurwitz, Derik Durbin, David Schuler, Brian Carter, Johanna Moore, Andie Parry, Kelly Campa, Carolyn Moorman, Siddhant Kishore, Annika Ganzeveld, Alexandra Braverman, Katherine Wells, Ria Reddy, and Ben Rezaei  
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**The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) reportedly advanced into southern and central Quneitra Province in southern Syria on February 27.** A southern Syria-based journalist reported that Israeli armored vehicles advanced toward a village in Khan Arnabeh, central Quneitra Province, on February 27.[20] The IDF reportedly destroyed infrastructure in a former Syrian Arab Army (SAA) military base in Masharah and fired warning shots in al Rafid before withdrawing to the Israel-Syria disengagement zone.[21] Mashrah is around nine kilometers east of the Israel-Syria disengagement zone. These IDF activities are part of Israel’s effort to prevent the interim Syrian government from establishing control over southern Syria.[22]

**Protesters demonstrated against Israeli operations in southern Syria.** Relatively small-scale protests occurred in Rif Dimashq and Daraa provinces in southern Syria on February 28.[23]



## Assessed Control of Terrain in Southwestern Syria February 28, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



**Syrian interim government forces have continued to respond to Assad regime remnant attacks across Syria since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on February 27.** Regime remnants fired small arms at a police station in Safita, Tartus Province, on February 27.[24] Syrian media reported that interim government forces arrested one former regime member.[25] Regime remnants separately attacked a police station in Qardaha, Latakia Province, on February 26 and a checkpoint in Jdeidet al Fadl, Rif Dimashq Province, on February 27.[26] Syrian media reported on February 27 that interim government forces declared a curfew around Qantara to pursue remnants.[27] Interim government forces deployed to al Muhajireen, Homs Province, on February 28 after individuals shot at a Syrian interim government force patrol.[28] It is not clear if the attackers were remnants of the Assad regime.[29] Interim government forces also pursued former regime elements in Albu Kamal, Deir ez Zor Province, on February 28. [30]

# Assessed Control of Terrain in Western Syria

February 28, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



**The Syrian interim government continued to call for sanctions relief on February 27.** Syrian Foreign Affairs Minister Asaad Shaibani told the UN Human Rights Council that “sanctions are an obstacle to building and reviving Syria.”[31] The European Union suspended some sanctions against Syria that pertain to Syria’s energy, transportation, banking, and reconstruction sectors on February 24.[32] Syrian Interim President Ahmed al Shara and his allies have prioritized securing sanctions relief from the West since forming the interim government in December 2024.[33]

## **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

**Unidentified Iraqi officials reportedly plan to use former Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al Khadimi's political connections to aid Iraq economically.[34]** Three Khadimi-affiliated Iraqi officials told Western media on February 28 that current Iraqi officials invited Khadimi to return to Iraq to use his foreign connections, purportedly with the United States and Saudi Arabia, to aid Iraq economically. Khadimi had a positive, working relationship with the United States during his tenure.[35] Khadimi's return to Iraq follows reports that the United States may sanction Iranian-aligned actors in Iraq.[36] Khadimi left Iraq after his premiership term ended due to security threats.[37] Iranian-backed Iraqi militias Asaib Ahl al Haq and Kataib Hezbollah attempted to assassinate Khadimi in November 2021.[38] Iraqi officials' willingness to invite Khadimi back indicates their concern over the threat of US sanctions.

**Iraqi media reported on February 28 that Turkish aircraft struck PKK positions in Duhok and Erbil provinces.[39]**

## **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

**The IDF Air Force conducted a strike in the Hermel area near the Syria-Lebanon border on February 27, killing Hezbollah fighter Mohammad Mahdi Ali Shahin.[40]** The IDF

reported that Shahin coordinated weapons transactions and smuggling for Hezbollah on the Syria-Lebanon border and in the Bekaa region.

**A Hezbollah official at a former fighter’s funeral called on the Lebanese government to counter “Israeli violations of Lebanese sovereignty,” which reflects the group’s severe degradation and prioritization of reconstitution.** Hezbollah officials held a funeral on February 27 for Hezbollah Unit 4400 member Mahran Ali Nasser al Din whom the IDF killed in an airstrike in the Bekaa Valley on February 26.[41] Unit 4400 is responsible for arms smuggling along the Lebanon-Syria border for Hezbollah.[42] Hezbollah parliamentarian Hussein al Hajj Hassan called on the Lebanese government to exert greater diplomatic and political pressure on Israel during al Din’s funeral.[43] Hassan avoided direct threats of Hezbollah military action against Israeli forces in Lebanon.[44] Hassan’s comments align with Hezbollah Secretary General Naim Qassem’s comments in recent days that Hezbollah had entered a “new phase” in which Hezbollah will support Lebanon’s diplomatic efforts to expel Israel from Lebanese territory.[45]

### **Iranian Decision-Making, Internal Dynamics, and Foreign Policy**

**Turkish Foreign Affairs Minister Hakan Fidan implicitly accused Iran of cooperating with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).** Fidan stated on February 28 that Iran will “follow the wrong path” if it continues to support the “Syrian Democratic Party”, likely referring to the SDF.[46] Fidan provided no evidence to support this claim. Iranian-backed militias have, in fact, previously fired at joint US-SDF facilities. Fidan also stated that if Iran seeks to stoke unrest in a country “by supporting a group in that country, another country will also cause [unrest] by supporting groups” within Iran.[47] Fidan is likely implicitly threatening to support opposition groups in Iran in response to Iranian support for militias in the region. Fidan also criticized Iranian support for militias in Iraq and Syria.[48] CTP-ISW previously assessed that Iran is likely pressuring the Iraqi federal government to avoid normalizing ties with the Syrian interim government as Turkey maintains close ties to the Syrian interim government.[49] Iran views Turkey’s influence in Syria as a threat to its long-standing strategic objectives.

**Senior Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) commanders continued to threaten another direct attack on Israel, likely to deter a potential Israeli strike on Iran.** The IRGC Second Coordination Deputy Brigadier General Ali Fazli announced on February 27 that Iran will conduct operation “True Promise 3,” the third missile strikes against Israel, “as scheduled.”[50] Several IRGC commanders have recently threatened to conduct “True Promise 3” and hit US bases and interests in the region.[51]

*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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