

Iran Update



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Information Cutoff: March 7, 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.

Insurgent cells continued to attack Syrian interim government personnel across Latakia and Tartous provinces as Syrian forces deployed to re-impose security over the coastal region.[1] Syrian government reinforcements deployed across to Tartous and Latakia on March 6 in response to coordinated attacks by Assadist insurgents on Syrian military checkpoints and patrols in Jableh, Latakia Province.[2] Clashes between Syrian government forces and insurgents spread overnight to other parts of Latakia and Tartous provinces.[3] The Syrian government deployed armored units, helicopters, and drone units to locate and target insurgents in the area.[4] Insurgents attempted to take control of hospitals across the coastal region and continued to attack security personnel as government forces advanced into coastal cities.[5] The Syrian government deployed armor, helicopters, and drone units to locate and target insurgents in the area.[6] Syrian government forces have killed or captured over 150 pro-Assad insurgents captured since March 6.[7]

The heaviest bouts of fighting between insurgent cells and government forces took place in Jableh, south of Latakia City, where insurgent cells launched coordinated attacks on March 6.[8] Insurgents attacked security forces as government forces advanced north on the coastal highway towards Jableh and targeted security forces with mortars and small arms within the city.[9] Security forces prevented pro-Assad insurgents from besieging a hospital on the Jableh outskirts and re-secured the Naval College in Jableh after several hours of clashes.[10] It does not appear that government forces have fully re-secured the city, however. Likely insurgents continued to conduct attacks in the city, including an attack that sabotaged a high voltage line that caused a power outage in Latakia Province.[11]

Government forces have secured most populated areas, but this does not mean that government forces have defeated the insurgency in these areas. Syrian government forces have secured most of the region's larger towns but still have not fully eliminated insurgent cells in Tartous and Latakia's Alawite-majority mountainous countryside.[12] Insurgents also do not wear uniforms and can quickly blend back into the population when they come under pressure from security forces, making them very difficult to defeat in one clearing operation.[13] Security forces advanced into some towns in the Latakia countryside and engaged insurgents, including Qardaha—Assad's hometown—in order to free dozens of security personnel that insurgents had taken hostage.[14] Security personnel expanded the campaign to pursue insurgents into the southern Hama countryside, suggesting that these insurgent cells have a presence outside of coastal heartland or that insurgents have fled the area.[15]

Government control over most populated areas will not necessarily prevent insurgents from returning, however. That cells of pro-Assad fighters were able to organize amongst themselves and respond quickly to the initial clashes in Jableh suggests that anti-government sentiment is relatively strong. Hardcore Assadists have been able to successfully exploit a variety of grievances against the Syrian interim government to recruit new members who may or may not be initially motivated by a desire to restore Assad. A Syrian near Beit Ana in Latakia said that many young men volunteered to shoot at government personnel after an unknown individual provided them with rifles.[16] Insurgencies against the interim government will likely continue to emerge in these areas until the government addresses the root causes of the Alawite community's feelings of disenfranchisement and secures the population against abuses from incompetent government security forces.

It does not appear that any one actor or group controls these Assadist insurgent cells, however. Syrian government forces captured several well-known Assad-era commanders, including Assad's former head of Air Force Intelligence Ibrahim Huwajja, but there is no clear evidence that they were involved in the inception or planning of coordinated attacks.[17] Several organized insurgent groups have also been tied to the current clashes, including Assadist groups like the Syrian Popular Resistance, ex-Republican Guard commander Muqdad Fataha's Shield of the Coast Brigade, and ex-Fourth Division member Ghiath Dalah's recently-announced Military Council for the Liberation of Syria.[18] Dalah called for restraint from his followers in a statement on March 7, condemning instances of sectarian-motivated violence and stating that he seeks to negotiate with the government.[19] It does not appear that Dalah or any other former regime elements fully control the coastal insurgents, despite his call to his followers. Interim government forces have conducted near-constant raids and searches for former Assad regime members in former regime strongholds since coming to power in December 2024. It is unlikely that a single large, organized, unified insurgent organization has been able to form and coordinate the majority of the targeted attacks against government forces on March 6.

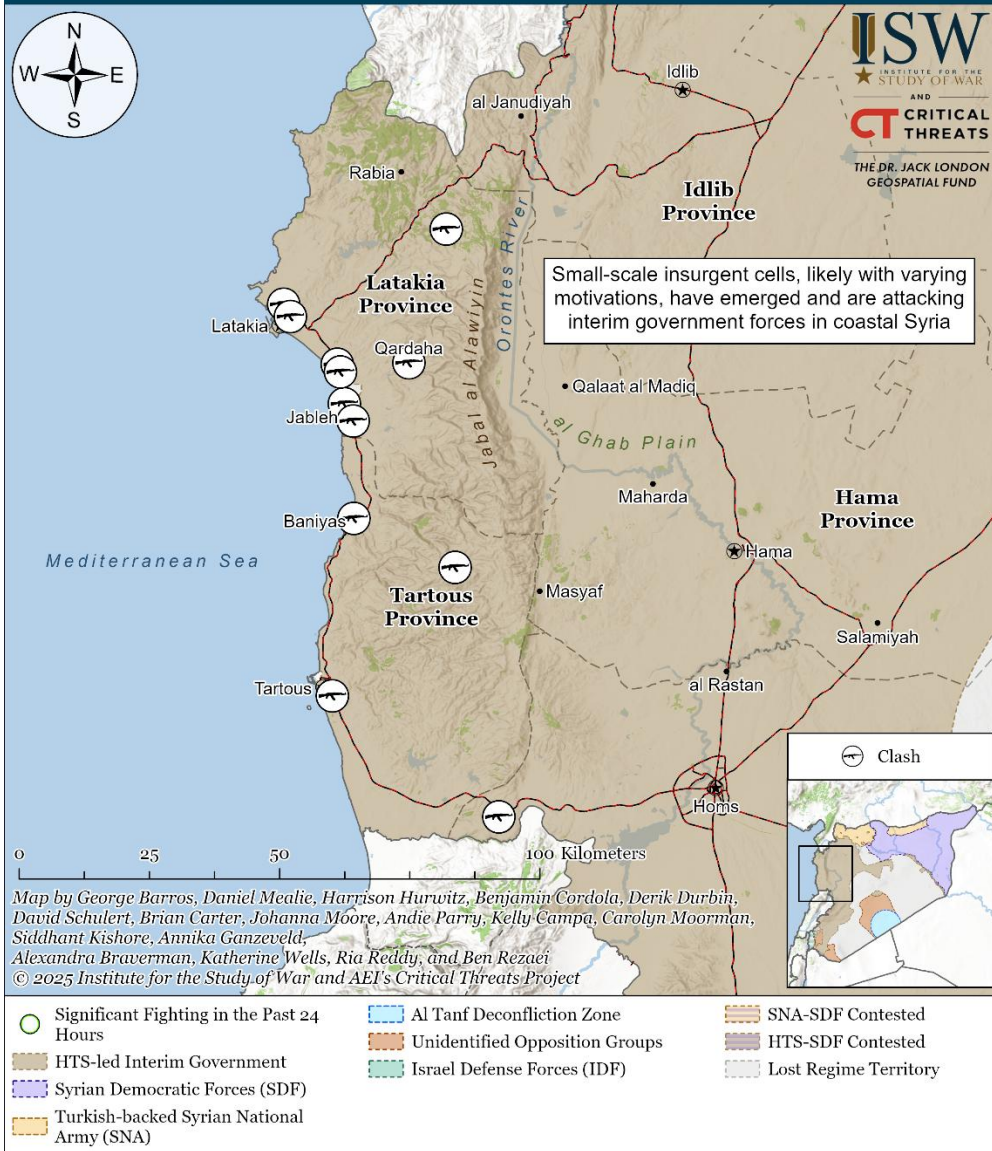
The Syrian Popular Resistance, a pro-Assad group, claimed numerous attacks targeting government forces in the coastal region.[20] The Syrian Popular Resistance claimed it engaged government forces in several towns and villages along the coast, including along the M4 highway north of Latakia.[21] Footage posted on social media on March 7 confirmed heavy fighting between unknown insurgents and the government forces along the highway.[22] The exact reach or strength of the Syrian Popular Resistance is unclear, but it does appear to be in communication with insurgents operating on

the ground. The group claimed on March 7 that it had taken control of numerous villages in Jabal al Alawiyyin and expanded the scope of its operations to Masyaf in the Hama countryside.[23]

Military reinforcements, including newly formed Syrian army units, deployed to the coastal region from across Syria to support counterinsurgency efforts.[24] Government reinforcements from Aleppo, Idlib, Hama, Homs, Damascus, Deir ez Zor, and some southern provinces travelled to the coastal region on March 6.[25] These reinforcements included units from several new Syrian army divisions that deployed from their respective areas of responsibility, including forces from the 62nd Division based in Hama, 118th Division based in Palmyra, and unspecified forces from Deir ez Zor.[26] The government has formed these divisions within the last two months.[27] The counterinsurgency campaign along the coast is likely the first large-scale operation for many of these units. This is also the first time that multiple divisions are coordinating division-level operations, but it remains unclear how formalized these division structures are and if they are structured like conventional military forces.

The tensions on the coast also appear to have drawn in armed groups that may or may not have fully integrated into Syrian army units. Syrian media posted footage that showed a large convoy from the Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror Brigade travelling to the coast.[28] The Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror Brigade is part of the Syrian National Army's First Corps and has been involved in fighting against the SDF along the Manbij frontlines in recent weeks.[29]

Clashes in Western Syria March 7, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



Emerging reports of massacres in coastal Alawite communities perpetrated by interim government forces increase the likelihood that insurgent cells will expand in size, geographic distribution, and Alawite support. Widely circulated videos show that likely interim government forces massacred about 30 individuals in Mukhtariya, Latakia Province.[30] Pro-Assad forces reportedly ambushed interim forces near the town on March 6, leading the interim government to deploy there and fight throughout the night.[31] This incident and others occurring at a smaller scale across coastal Syria appear to be poorly executed counter-insurgency operations that transform into extrajudicial executions by HTS-affiliated forces in Alawite towns.[32] These heavy-handed operations will further alienate and inspire fear in the coastal minority populations. The insurgents probably hope to trigger violent government reprisals to generate support for their insurgency. Alawite activists have reportedly warned that the attacks on interim government forces in Latakia Province on March 6 aimed

to elicit a harsh response from the Syrian government.[33] There is a climate of distrust between Alawites in the coastal regions and the government, with pro-government sources blaming Alawites for the executions, and Alawites considering the initial attacks on interim government forces to be "false flag attacks."[34]

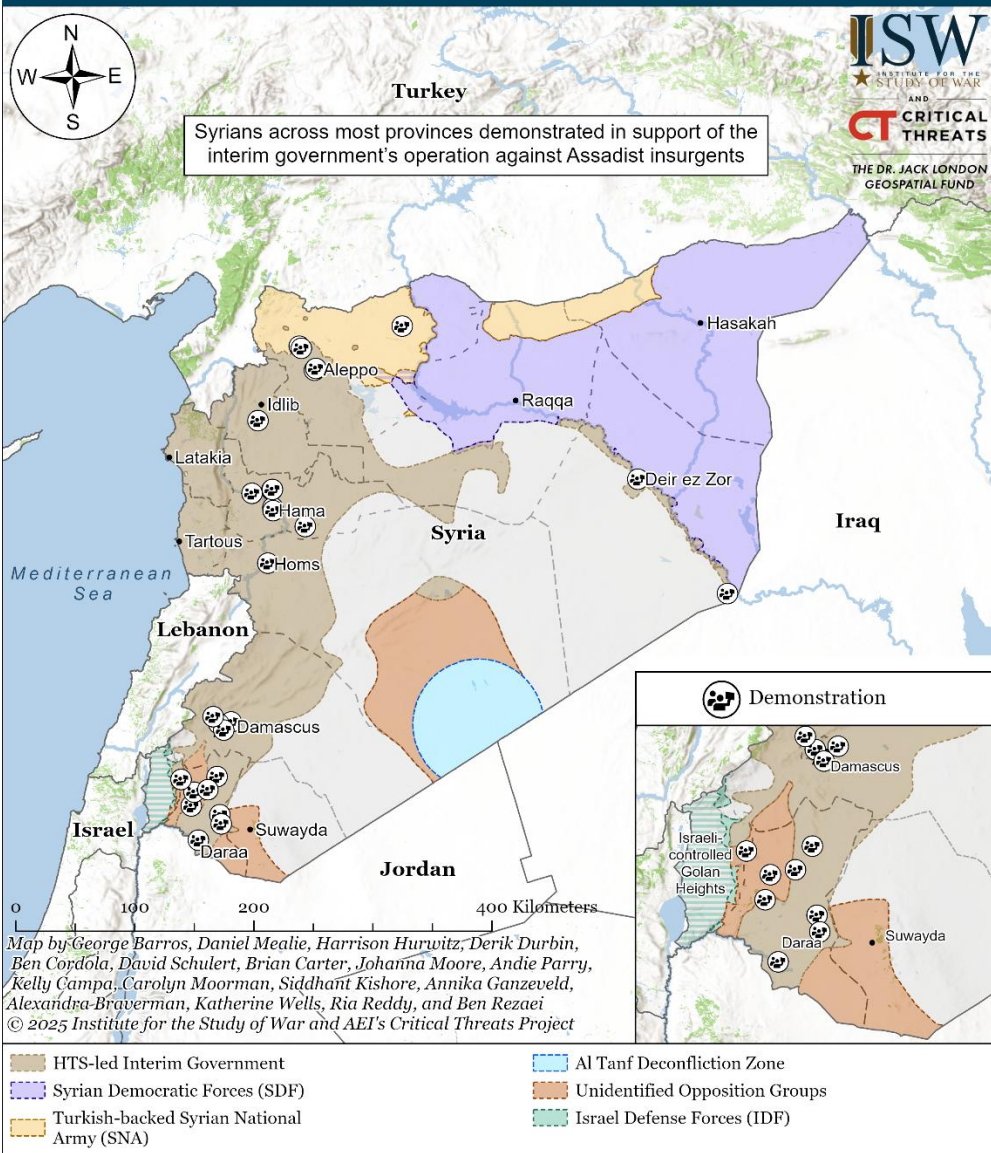
Thousands of Syrians not associated with organized military structures have expressed their intent to fight against regime remnants in coastal areas.[35] Sources in the Interior Ministry blamed violence and disorder on "unorganized popular crowds [that] headed to the coast" and called attacks "individual violations" that the government forces were working to stop.[36] These statements suggest that the Syrian government lacks command-and-control over some formations along the coast. A heavy-handed approach that fails to clearly distinguish between insurgents and civilians can be a feature of poor command and control within a military organization. Some Assad remnants have shed their fatigues and are reportedly mixing with the civilian population, which creates additional problems for the government forces as they attempt to identify and kill combatants.[37]

Harsh counter-insurgency operations undermine government efforts to re-establish control over an area by exacerbating fears within the community that government forces are targeting civilians or specific confessional or ethnic groups. This fear can in turn drive popular support and recruitment for insurgent groups even beyond the group's initial power base and community.[38] Such a dynamic could easily spiral out of control into larger armed conflict if left unchecked.

Syrians across most provinces demonstrated in support of the interim government's operation against Assadist insurgents on March 7. Over 25 municipalities in nine provinces held demonstrations.[39] Assadist insurgents reportedly opened fire on demonstrators in Homs on March 6.[40] This substantial showing across Syria suggests that HTS retains popularity across broad swathes of the country.

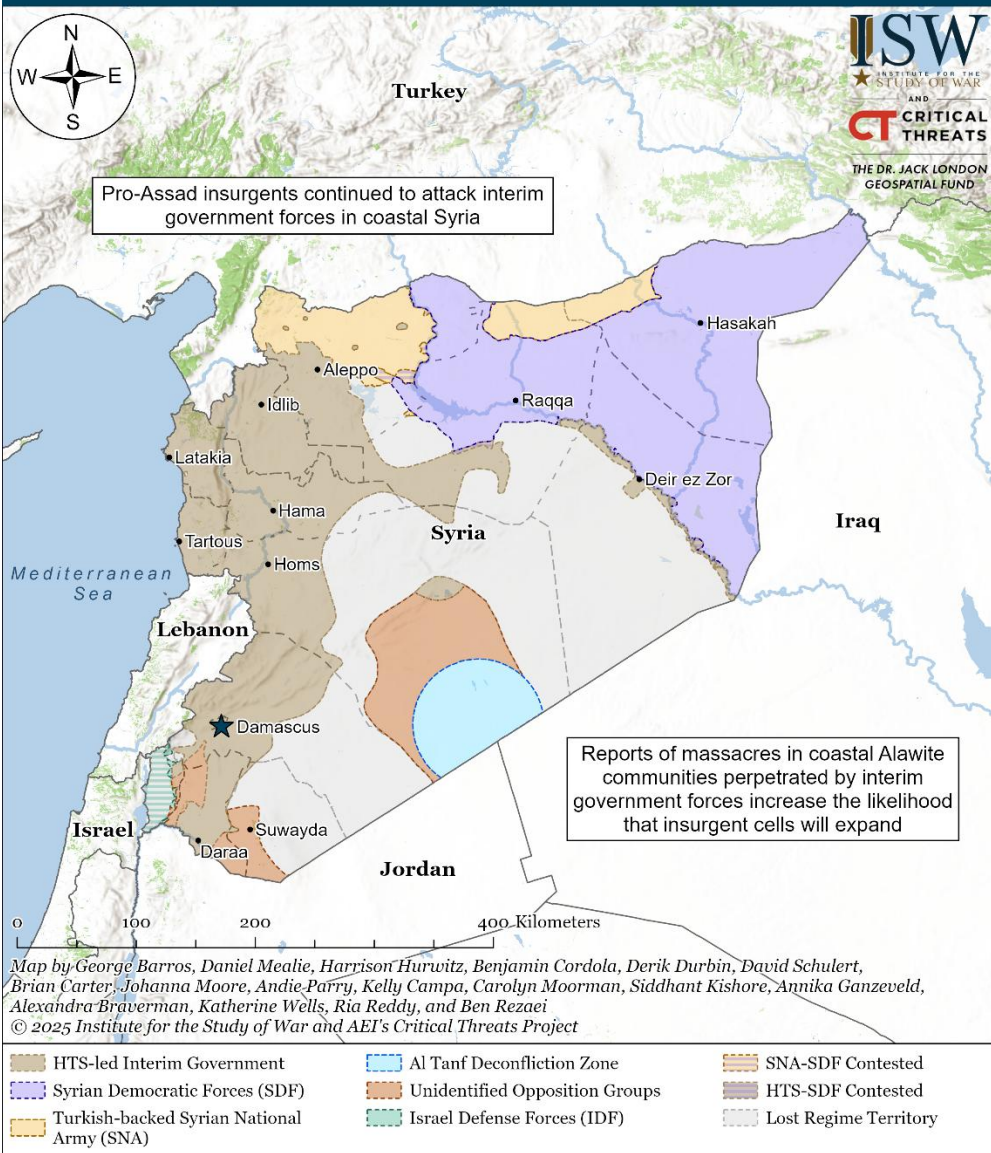
Demonstrations across Syria, March 3-March 7, 2025

March 7, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



Assessed Control of Terrain in Syria

March 7, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



US President Donald Trump sent a letter to Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei on March 5 that proposed negotiations on Iran’s nuclear program.[41] Trump told reporters in Washington, DC, on March 7 that he would prefer to pursue a nuclear deal, but that “the other option will solve the problem.”[42] Trump is presumably referring to a military strike targeting Iran’s nuclear facilities.[43] Trump warned that “something is going to happen very soon” regarding Iran.

Iranian political and religious officials rejected negotiations with the United States in the immediate hours following the announcement of Trump’s letter. It is unclear how the Supreme Leader will respond in the days and weeks ahead. Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Abbas Araghchi told Western media on March 7 that Iran will not resume negotiations with the United States while the United States continues to impose its “maximum pressure” policy.[44] Several Friday prayer leaders across Iran rejected negotiations with the United States in sermons on March 7.[45]

Friday prayer leaders receive guidance for the content of their Friday sermons from the Office of the Supreme Leader, which indicates that their comments are a coordinated messaging campaign. Khamenei previously categorically rejected nuclear negotiations with the United States during a speech on February 7.[46] Khamenei may choose to negotiate with the United States indirectly through European, Russian, or Qatari intermediaries, for example. Khamenei is scheduled to meet with senior military officials and civil servants for Ramadan on March 8 where they will likely discuss the letter.[47]

Iran’s refusal to negotiate with the United States will further deteriorate Iran’s economic situation, which could trigger internal unrest. Iran is facing dire economic conditions, with inflation reaching approximately 35 percent in February 2025 and the Iranian rial regularly reaching record-low exchange rates.[48] Trump re-instituted “maximum pressure” sanctions, which target Iranian oil exports to discourage Iran from pursuing a nuclear weapon, on February 4.[49] The United States is also considering a plan under which it could ask allies to stop and inspect Iranian oil tankers, which will help impose the “maximum pressure” policy at sea.[50] Iranian officials are insisting that Iran should increase its ideologization efforts, such as countering alleged US-instituted soft war and psychological operations, rather than addressing economic concerns.[51] Increased maximum pressure sanctions, combined with ideologization efforts, could stoke unrest and lead to protests in Iran.

Senior Iranian military advisors, IRGC officials, and parliamentarians are increasingly lobbying the Supreme Leader to pursue a nuclear weapon.[52] Iranian officials continue to suggest that Iran could change its nuclear strategy to address growing external security threats as Iran continues to increase its enriched uranium stockpile.[53] It is unclear at this time whether the Supreme Leader has decided to pursue a nuclear weapon or a nuclear deal. Khamenei’s decision will likely depend on whether Iran calculates that the greatest threat to regime survival is internal or external.

Russian Permanent Representative to the UN in Vienna Mikhail Ulyanov stated that Iranian production of 60 percent enriched uranium has “no weapons risk.”[54] International Atomic Energy Agency Director Raphael Grossi said on March 3 that Iran currently has enough 60 percent enriched uranium, if enriched further, to produce six nuclear weapons.[55] Western media reported on March 4 that Russia offered to mediate talks between the United States and Iran.[56] Ulyanov’s statement further demonstrates that Russia would not help secure US interests as a mediator between the United States and Iran in nuclear negotiations.[57]

Houthi Supreme Leader Abdulmalik al Houthi threatened on March 7 to resume attacks on maritime shipping in the Red Sea on March 7 if Israel does not restart aid deliveries into the Gaza Strip by March 11.[58] These attacks are aimed at disrupting trade to Israel in support of Hamas after October 7, 2023.[59] The Houthis paused their attacks on commercial vessels in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden in November 2024.[60] The Houthis continued launching drone and missile attacks on US military vessels and Israeli territory until Israel and Hamas implemented the ceasefire on January 19, 2025.[61] The Houthis have regularly threatened to restart their campaign against Israel in the event the Houthis felt that Israel was not adhering to the Israel-Hamas ceasefire terms.[62]

Key Takeaways:

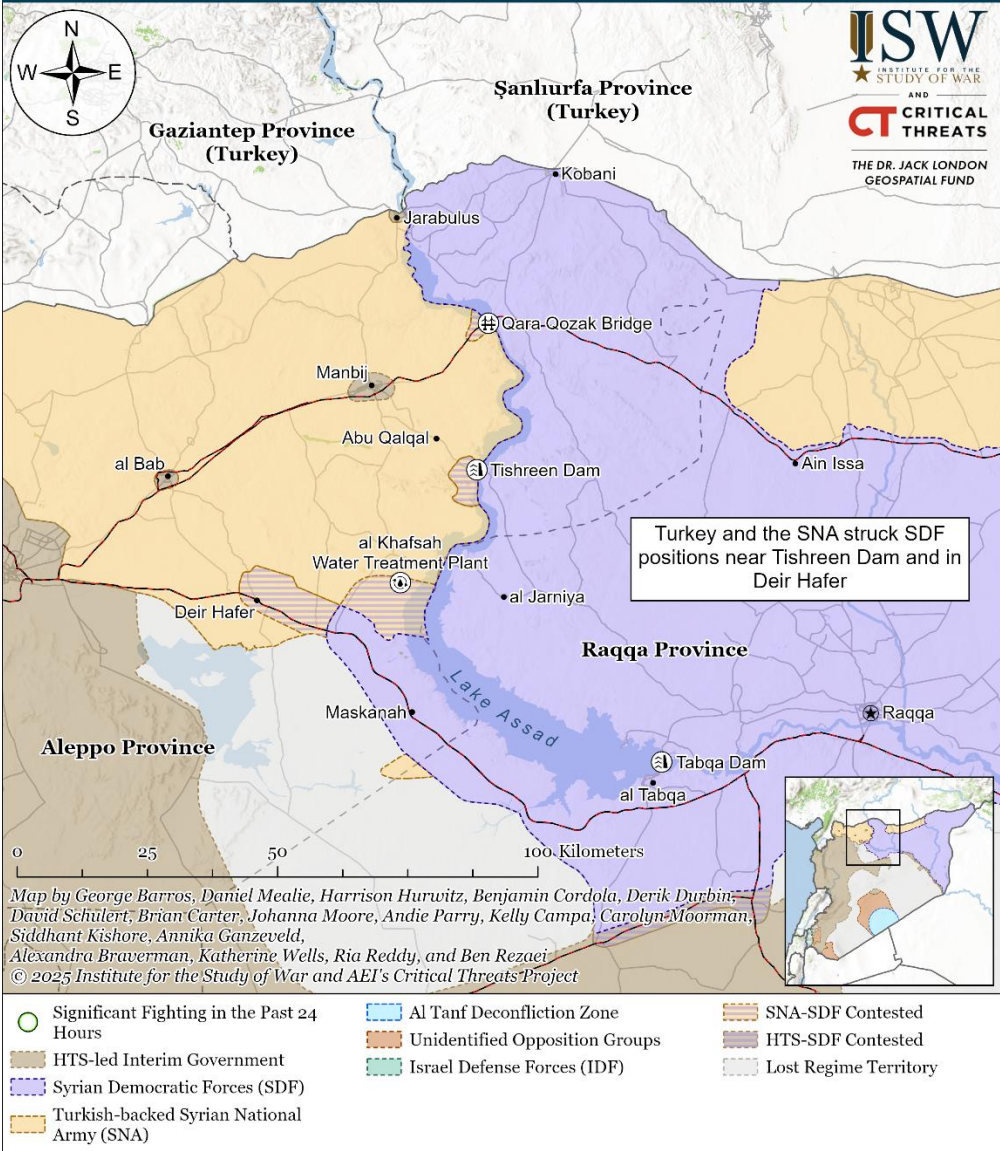
- **Insurgency in Syria:** Insurgent cells continued to attack Syrian interim government personnel across Latakia and Tartous provinces as Syrian forces deployed to re-impose security over the coastal region. Government forces have secured most populated areas, but this does not mean that government forces have defeated the insurgency in these areas. It does not appear that any one actor or group controls these Assadist insurgent cells.
- **Sectarianism in Syria:** Emerging reports of massacres in coastal Alawite communities perpetrated by interim government forces increase the likelihood that insurgent cells will expand in size, geographic distribution, and Alawite support.
- **Iranian Nuclear Negotiations:** US President Donald Trump sent a letter to Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei on March 5 that proposed negotiations on Iran's nuclear program. Iranian political and religious officials rejected negotiations with the United States in the immediate hours following the announcement of Trump's letter. It is unclear how the Supreme Leader will respond in the days and weeks ahead.
- **Iranian Nuclear Weapons Program:** Senior Iranian military advisors, IRGC officials, and parliamentarians are increasingly lobbying the Supreme Leader to pursue a nuclear weapon. Russian Permanent Representative to the UN in Vienna Mikhail Ulyanov stated that Iranian production of 60 percent enriched uranium has "no weapons risk." Ulyanov's statement further demonstrates that Russia would not help secure US interests as a mediator between the United States and Iran in nuclear negotiations.
- **Houthis and the Red Sea:** Houthi Supreme Leader Abdulmalik al Houthi threatened on March 7 to resume attacks on maritime shipping in the Red Sea on March 7 if Israel does not restart aid deliveries into the Gaza Strip by March 11.

Syria

Turkey and the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) have continued to attack US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) positions in Aleppo and Raqqa provinces since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on March 6. Turkish aircraft struck SDF positions near Tishreen Dam and in Deir Hafer, southwest of Tishreen Dam on March 6.[63] SNA artillery shelled SDF positions in Ain Issa, Raqqa Province.[64]

Assessed Control of Terrain around Manbij

March 7, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



Russia delivered local Syrian currency to the Syrian central bank on March 6.[65] Russia began to print Syrian currency during the Syrian civil war and will reportedly continue to deliver more currency in the future. Russia last delivered local Syrian currency on February 14 following a call between Syrian interim President Ahmed al Shara and Russian President Vladimir Putin.[66] Russia's delivery of Syrian local currently follows Syrian officials recently expressing interest in developing economic ties with Russia.[67]

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

Iraqi Shia political parties continue to discuss how to restructure the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) to meet US demands. Iraqi media reported on March 7 that Shia Coordination Framework leaders have “seriously” considered options to both restructure and preserve the PMF, including distributing the PMF across Iraq as a formal national guard entity.[68] The Shia Coordination Framework is a loose coalition of Shia political parties, some of which are backed by Iran. Many of the militias that comprise the PMF answer to Iran.[69] The United States has recently pressured the Iraqi federal government to disarm and integrate Iranian-backed Iraqi militias into the Iraqi military establishment.[70] CTP-ISW previously assessed that the integration of militias that answer to Iran into the Iraqi security establishment will increase Iranian influence in the Iraqi security sector.[71]

Multiple Iranian-backed Iraqi parliamentarians announced on March 7 their plan to boycott the parliament session on March 8 because the PMF law does not appear on the parliamentary agenda.[72] Iranian-backed Shia political parties have continued to compete for the chairmanship of the Popular Mobilization Commission (PMC), which Faleh al Fayyadh currently holds.[73] The PMC is responsible for ensuring the militias in the PMF answer to the Iraqi federal government.[74] The PMF law in discussion would force some PMF commanders and leaders, including Fayyadh, to retire due to their age.[75] Parliament met last on February 17.[76] Former Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki’s State of Law Coalition and Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Asaib Ahl al Haq’s Sadiqoun Bloc announced a boycott of Parliament on February 17, until the law was included on the voting schedule.[77]

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

See topline section.

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

Nothing significant to report.

Iranian Decision-Making, Internal Dynamics, and Foreign Policy

Iran's proposed budget boosts allocations for religious and ideological organizations, which is likely part of the regime's focus on ideologizing the Iranian public. Iran's proposed budget for the upcoming Persian calendar year outlines a 233 percent increase in funding for the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Baghiyatollah al Azam Sociocultural Headquarters and a 177 percent increase in funding for the Islamic Propaganda Organization.[78] The IRGC Baghiyatollah al Azam Sociocultural Headquarters and the Islamic Propaganda Organization play key roles in enforcing the ideals of Khamenei's Second Step of the Revolution.[79] Khamenei's Second Step calls for greater control over Iran's information space, and officials frequently cite this directive to justify censorship and other restrictive measures on media and public expression. Iran likely aims to increase budget for these institutions to counter growing anti-regime sentiment and control the information space.

Iran's proposed budget for the new Persian calendar year reflects a 40 percent increase in funds for Al Mustafa International University from the previous year, with an additional 23 percent planned for the year.[80] Al Mustafa International University, a Shia university in Qom Province, focuses on religious education for international students and ideological propagation.[81] University head and senior leader in the Iranian Assembly of Experts Alireza Arafī stated that the university has played a significant role in expanding Shia influence worldwide and claimed that the university and has trained more than 80,000 students from 130 nations.[82] The US Treasury Department sanctioned Al Mustafa International University in December 2020 for facilitating the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Forces (IRGC-QF) recruitment efforts to recruit members for Axis of Resistance militia groups, including Afghan Fatemiyoun and Pakistani Zainabiyoun fighters.[83] The increase comes amid rising taxes, a budget deficit, and economic hardships, fueling criticism over the government's prioritization of religious and ideological institutions over essential public services.[84]

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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