

Iran Update



**Andie Parry, Ria Reddy, Carolyn Moorman, Siddhant Kishore,
Alexandra Braverman, Nicholas Carl**

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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.

Iran, China, and Russia issued a joint statement on March 14 effectively condemning the US “maximum pressure” strategy vis-a-vis Iran.[1] The statement came from a meeting of the Iranian, Chinese, and Russian deputy foreign ministers in Beijing.[2] The statement called on “relevant parties”—a reference to the United States—to “lift all illegal unilateral sanctions” on Iran. The statement described Iranian nuclear activities as “exclusively for peaceful purposes,” despite numerous indications that Tehran has restarted its nuclear weapons program.[3] Iran currently has enough high-enriched uranium to build six nuclear weapons, according to the International Atomic Energy Agency.[4] The statement also emphasized the parties’ commitment to strengthening their cooperation through BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Tehran wants to use these institutions to undermine US sanctions and build a parallel economic order to the US-led one.

The Iran-China-Russia statement underscores that Russia is unlikely to play a constructive role in mediating between the United States and Iran. Western media reported that the Kremlin has offered to mediate in recent days.[5] CTP-ISW has assessed that Russia is unlikely to secure US interests via such mediation, especially in negotiations focused on Iranian nuclear activities and the Axis of Resistance.[6]

The Kurdish-majority Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) rejected the draft constitution that Syrian President Ahmed al Shara adopted on March 13.[7] The SDC is the political wing of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). The AANES similarly stated on March 13 that the constitution was too like the Bashar al

Assad regime's constitution and noted that the focus on Arab identity is a "de-facto falsification of Syria's national and societal identity." [8] The SDC claimed that the constitution "grants the executive authority absolute powers, while restricting political activity" and obstructs democratic transition. [9] CTP-ISW noted on March 13 that Shara could use some of the articles in the constitution to consolidate his power over the Syrian state. [10]

The SDC view of the constitution could impact the political and military integration efforts between AANES and Damascus that began on March 10, but it is unclear what exact effects it will have at this time. [11] The SDC condemned the constitution drafting process when National Dialogue Conference sessions were not held in AANES territory before committing to integration efforts. [12] Civilians in SDF-controlled Hasakah shared the SDC sentiment and demonstrated against the new constitution on March 14. [13]

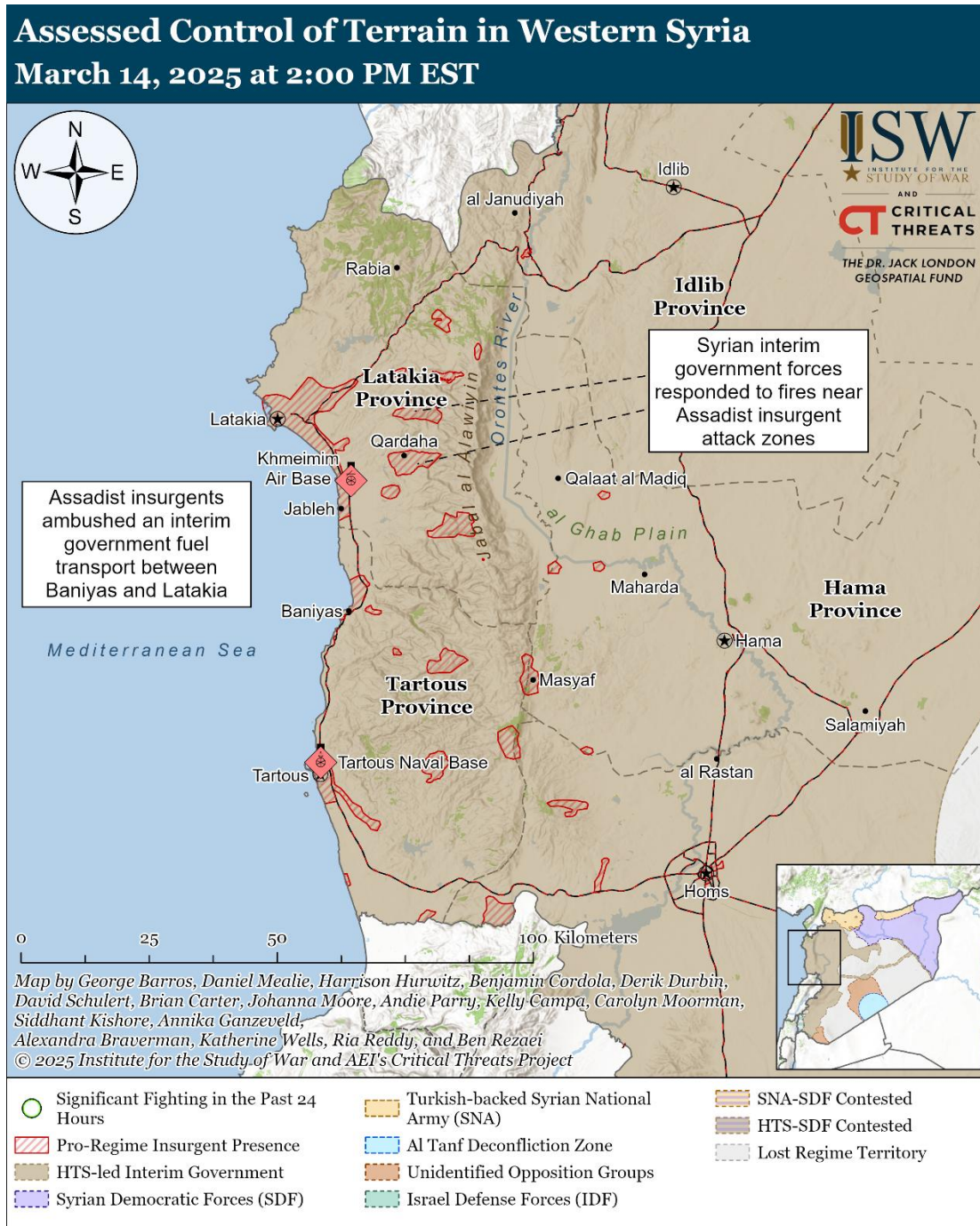
Assadist insurgents ambushed an interim government patrol securing fuel trucks between Baniyas and Latakia on March 12. [14] The Syrian Popular Resistance (SPR) claimed the attack and stated that government forces did not detain the fighters responsible. [15] Local media contrastingly reported that government forces did detain someone. [16] The SPR has little incentive to lie about the detention of its fighters, as the repeated publication of clearly false information risks discrediting the group among its target communities. Acquiring the intelligence necessary to consistently detain insurgents—rather than innocent bystanders—very often plagues counter-insurgency operations, moreover. Arresting the wrong person could spur additional grievances and mistrust of the interim government in these coastal communities.

Attacks on fuel transports in this area could have wide-reaching effects if conducted at a larger scale, as the Baniyas port is critical for energy shipments into Syria. Continuing attacks that target energy infrastructure could worsen the economy and living conditions outside of coastal Syria, where the Assadist insurgency is currently centered. Insurgent leaders may calculate that deteriorating economic conditions will weaken popular support for the interim government and generate momentum for the Assadist movement. Interim government forces collected small arms in negotiated settlements with locals around Baniyas on March 14, suggesting that wrongful arrests have not deterred some communities from collaborating with security officials. [17]

Interim government forces responded to several fires in insurgent attack zones in Latakia Province on March 13. [18] It is unclear at this time whether the fires near both Sunni and Alawite communities were intentionally set or by whom. Sectarian Sunni group Saraya Ansar al Sunnah set forest fires that it claimed endangered Alawites in Qardaha, Latakia Province, on March 5 before major insurgent violence began in coastal Syria. [19] Saraya Ansar al Sunnah has made repeated sectarian statements that warned it would attack Alawites for crimes committed under Assad and that the group would continue its attacks until the Alawites and Shia were "eliminated" or displaced from the region. [20] These forest fires exhaust limited government resources and could exacerbate disorder in an already tense environment.

Assadist insurgents likely exploited Latakia Province's mountainous geography to delay the interim government's response to major insurgent attacks on March 5-7. Insurgent cells attacked Syrian interim government personnel across Latakia and Tartous provinces, leading government forces to deploy to re-impose security over the coastal region in early March. [21] The

interim government response resulted in sectarian violence and extrajudicial killings in some instances. Insurgents chose a choke point on an east to west highway from which interim government forces could access insurgent attack zones on the coast.[22] The fighters fired at vehicles passing the area, blocking the road with disabled cars and discouraging anyone from trying to pass.[23] Insurgents will likely reuse this road-blocking tactic to isolate areas where they are conducting attacks. The terrain in these areas is such that any road-bound force will be canalized by the terrain and roadways and thus easily ambushed from the high ground surrounding the roads.[24] This method highlights the tactical proficiency of this insurgency of former Assad regime officers and soldiers.[25]



Russia is using both diplomatic and economic incentives to gain favor with the interim Syrian government, likely to retain its military basing rights in Syria. Russia and the interim government have engaged in months-long talks over the future of Russian bases in Syria without conclusion.[26] Interim Syrian President Ahmed al Shara told Reuters on March 11 that he aims to “preserve. . . deep strategic relations” with Russia, suggesting that Russian officials still have room to influence Shara’s decision making, especially through incentives.[27] Russia has avoided publicly condemning Damascus for its response to insurgent activity on Syria’s coasts, which led to mass extrajudicial killings, but reportedly strongly denounced the new Syrian administration in a closed-door UN briefing on March 10.[28] Russian envoy Vassily Nebenzia compared the partially government-perpetrated sectarian violence to the 1994 Rwandan genocide.[29] Russian Foreign Affairs Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova said on March 13 that Moscow has faith “that the current authorities in Damascus recognize their responsibility to protect the legitimate rights of citizens in Syria, regardless of their religious affiliations.” Zakharova's statement is far from accusing Damascus of perpetrating a genocide, further suggesting that Moscow is tempering its public condemnation of the Shara government, which may be part of a larger effort to maintain good working relations with the interim government and to secure a deal for the bases.[30]

Russia has also established some economic cooperation with Syria since February. Russia delivered local Syrian currency to the Syrian central bank on February 12 following a call between Syrian Interim President Ahmed al Shara and Russian President Vladimir Putin.[31] A tanker sanctioned for transporting Russian oil also arrived at the Baniyas Port on March 6.[32] Russian fuel could alleviate the energy shortages that the interim government is facing. Syria also sources fuel through other avenues, such as Qatar and the SDF, which present adequate alternatives to Russian fuel, possibly making Russian economic leverage less effective in this context.[33]

Key Takeaways:

- **Iran:** Iran, China, and Russia issued a joint statement effectively condemning the US “maximum pressure” strategy vis-a-vis Iran. The statement reaffirms that Russia is unlikely to play a constructive role in mediating between the United States and Iran.
- **Syria:** The Kurdish-majority SDC rejected the draft constitution that Syrian President Ahmed al Shara approved. It is unclear what effect this rejection will have on ongoing efforts to integrate the SDF into the interim Syrian government armed forces.
- **Syria:** Russia is using diplomatic and economic incentives to develop and maintain a working relationship with the interim Syrian government, likely in order to maintain Russian military basing there.

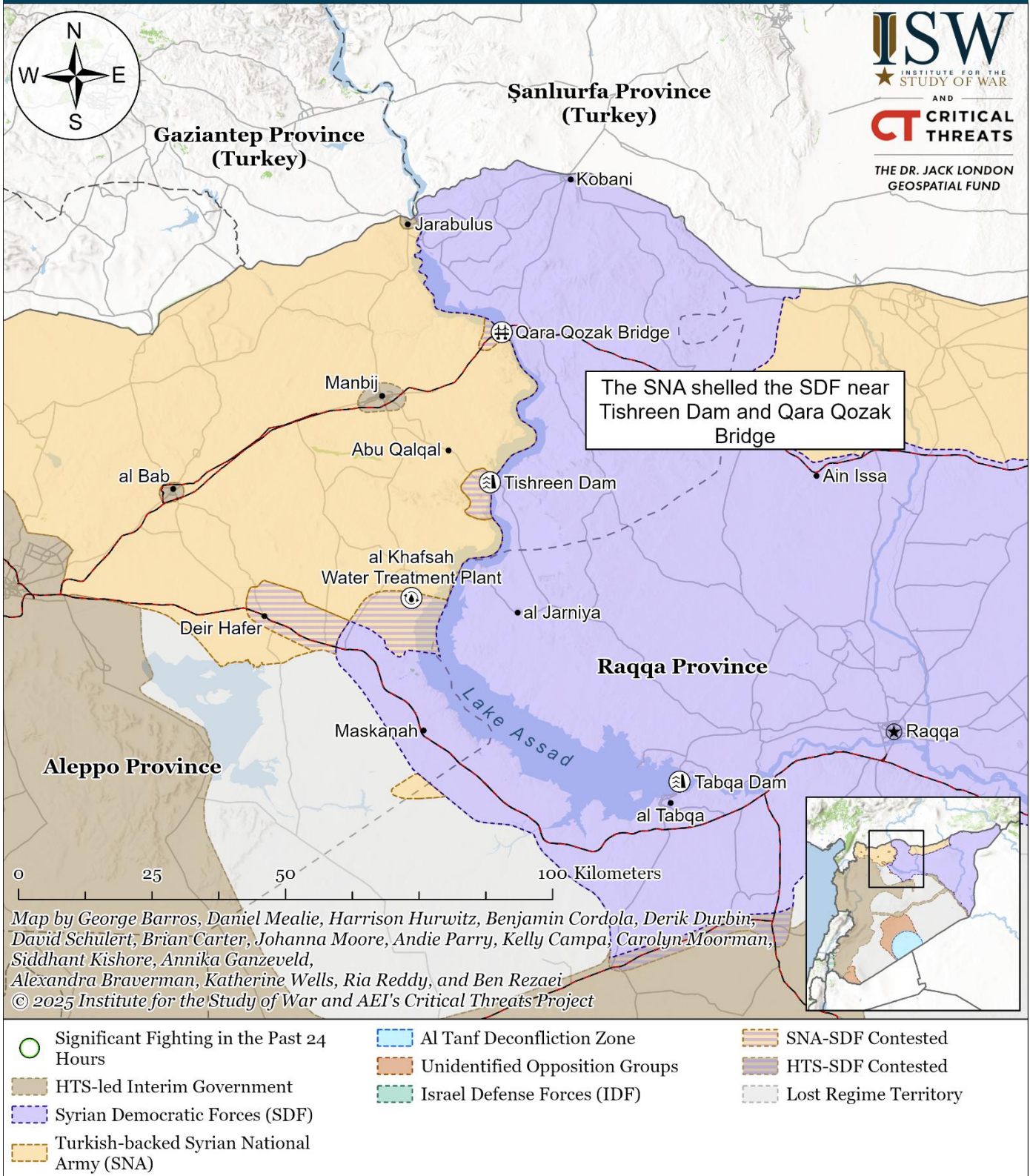
Syria

The Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) shelled the SDF along the Peace Spring frontlines in Raqqa Province on March 13.[34]

The SNA shelled SDF positions near Tishreen Dam and Qara Qozak Bridge on March 14.[35]

Assessed Control of Terrain around Manbij

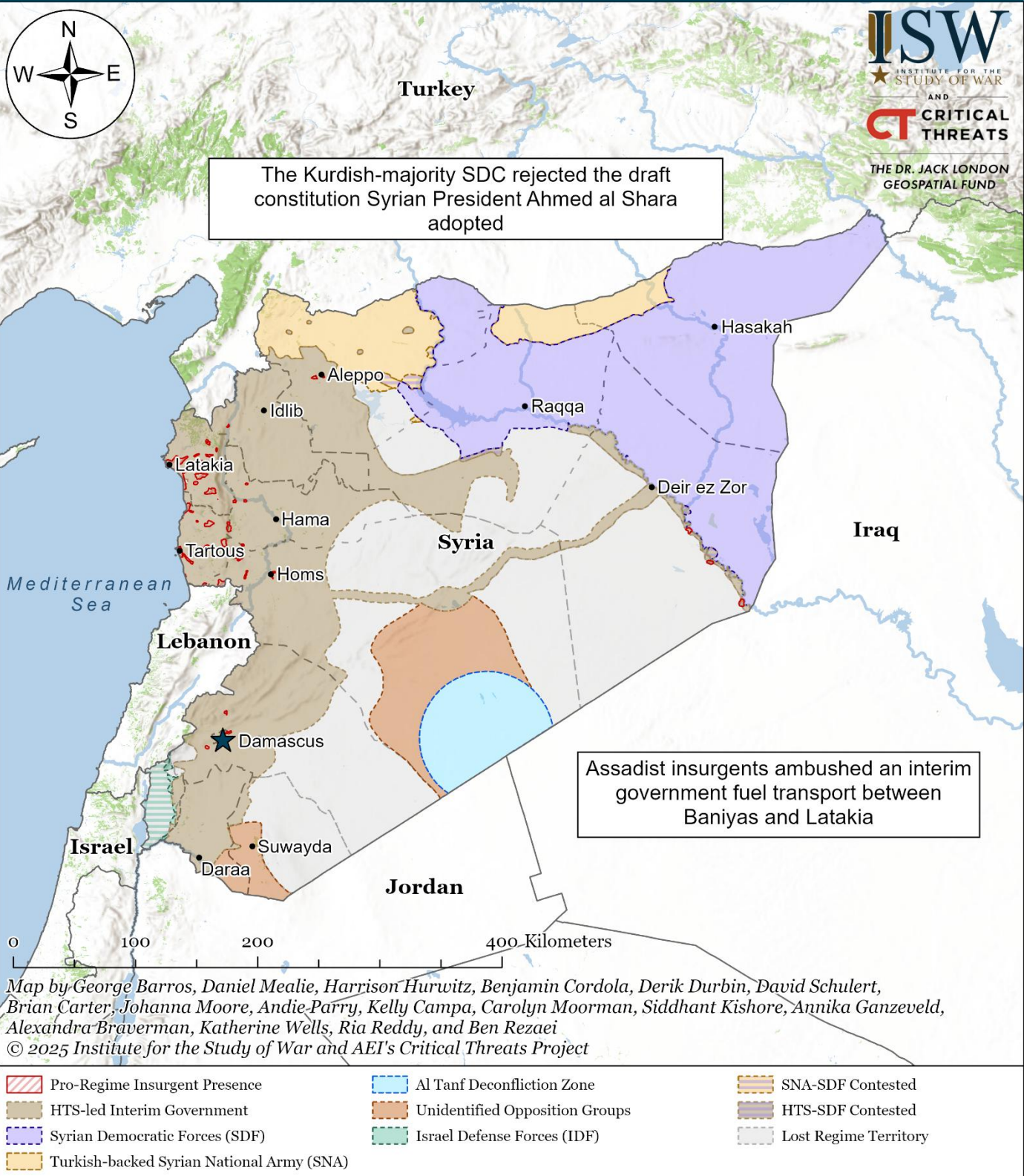
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The Druze community in Suwayda Province remains deeply divided toward the interim Syrian government. The spiritual Druze leader, Sheikh Hikmat al Hijri, denied reaching any agreement with the interim Syrian government on March 13.[36] Hijri labeled the interim government as an “extremist” regime and condemned Suwayda Province residents for cooperating with it.[37] Prominent Druze militias, including the Men of Dignity Movement, Mudafa al Karama, and Ahrar Jabal al Arab Gathering, agreed with the interim Syrian Interior Ministry on March 6 to establish locally led provincial security forces under interim Syrian government control.[38] Another Druze spiritual leader, Hamoud al Hanawi, expressed support for Interim Syrian President Ahmad al Shara and signaled his willingness to cooperate with Shara.[39]

Assessed Control of Terrain in Syria

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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

Syrian Interim Foreign Affairs Minister Assad al Shaibani paid an official visit to Iraq on March 14 where he discussed bilateral relations and the potential formation of a joint anti-Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) operation room.[40] This visit follows a meeting between Iraqi, Jordanian, Lebanese, Syrian, and Turkish officials in Jordan on March 9 on the situation in Syria, which included discussion about ISIS.[41] It is notable that the meeting between Shaibani's visit to Iraq occurred despite Iranian and Iranian-backed Iraqi actors trying to prevent the normalization of ties between Baghdad and Damascus.[42]

Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Kataib Hezbollah released a statement on March 13, denying responsibility for recent violence targeting Syrians in Iraq.[43] Kataib Hezbollah added that the Iraqi federal government is responsible for addressing the perpetrators of the violence. This statement comes after a newly formed Shia group called the Ya Ali Popular Formations posted a video on March 11 purportedly of masked individuals physically threatening Syrian nationals in a bakery in Baghdad.[44] The group has released several statements about its plan to "pursue" Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) members and supporters in Iraq.[45] CTP-ISW assessed on March 12 that the risk of sectarian violence from Syria spilling into Iraq is increasing partly due to this group's actions.[46] Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani ordered the formation of a specialized team to pursue those involved in the attacks.[47]

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

Nothing significant to report.

Iranian Decision-Making, Internal Dynamics, and Foreign Policy

Iranian authorities have grown increasingly concerned about popular unrest and anti-regime protests amid deteriorating economic conditions. Iranian leaders have held several “high-level meetings” recently to discuss possible widespread protests and measures to “head them off,” according to an unspecified Iranian official.[48] Another Iranian official told Reuters that Iran is “like a powder keg” and further economic issues could “set it off.” Economic issues have fueled widespread protests in Iran repeatedly in recent years.[49] Reuters spoke to some Iranian citizens who responded positively to the notion of an international nuclear deal that brings economic relief to Iran.[50]

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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