

Iran Update



Annika Ganzeveld, Siddhant Kishore, Kelly Campa, Carolyn Moorman, Ben Rezaei, Katherine Wells, Johanna Moore, Ria Reddy, Alexandra Braverman, Davit Gasparyan, Victoria Penza, Avery Borens, and Brian Carter

Information Cutoff: February 12, 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.

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.

Syrian Interim President Ahmed al Shara formed a preparatory committee on February 12 that is mostly comprised of pro-HTS individuals who are loyal to Shara.[1] The composition of this committee suggests that it will likely make decisions that align with Shara’s views and objectives. Shara announced on January 30 that he would form a preparatory committee to facilitate “deliberations” and “consultations” about the National Dialogue Conference.[2] The National Dialogue Conference will reportedly represent all segments of Syrian society and facilitate the drafting of a new Syrian constitution.[3] It is unclear what role the preparatory committee will play in organizing and overseeing the conference. Shara also stated on January 30 that the Syrian interim government would unveil a “Constitutional Declaration” after the formation of a preparatory committee.[4] The preparatory committee is comprised of five males and two females and does not appear to include representatives of the Alawite, Druze, Kurdish, and Shia communities. The committee includes the following individuals:

- **Yousef al Hajer:** Hajer is from al Shuhail, Deir ez Zor Province, which was a Jabhat al Nusra stronghold until ISIS declared the formation of a caliphate in June 2014.[5] Hajer was injured in an April 2024 attack that targeted Abu Maria al Qahtani, one of the founders of Jabhat al Nusra.[6] Hajer previously served as the head of the HTS Political Bureau and as a member of the HTS-controlled Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) Shura Council in northwestern Syria.[7]
- **Hassan al Daghim:** Daghim is Sunni and previously headed the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army’s (SNA) Moral Guidance Department.[8] Daghim and other SNA members met with Shara in late December 2024 to discuss the integration of armed groups into the new Syrian Defense Ministry.[9] Daghim stated on January 31 that the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) is “one of the Syrian components and cannot be distinguished from other

[components].”[10] Daghim was previously a strong critic of Shara but reconciled with Shara in 2024.[11]

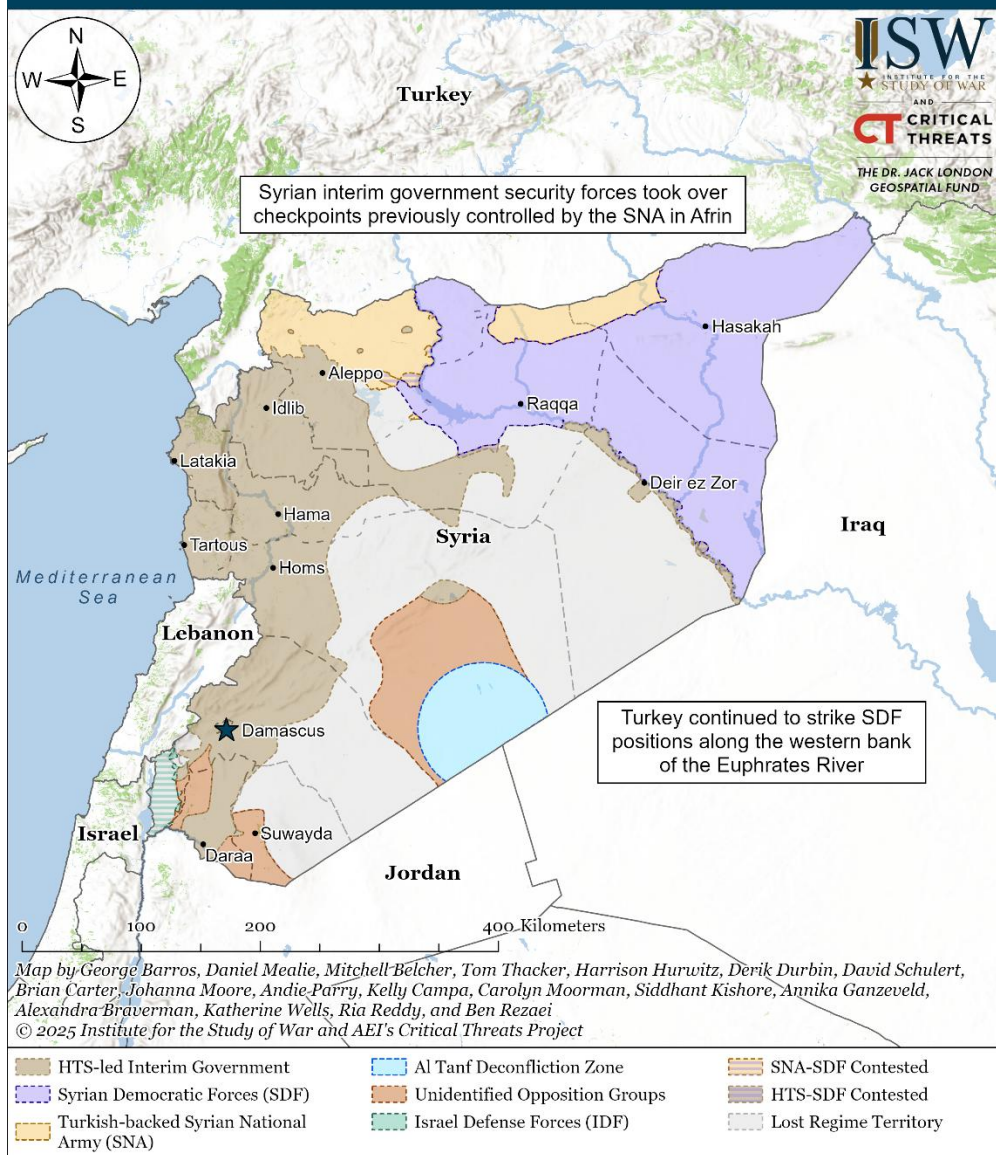
- **Hind Qabawat:** Qabawat is a Christian who has spent years promoting interfaith tolerance, women’s rights, and conflict resolution in Syria.[12] Qabawat serves as the director of interfaith peacebuilding at George Mason University’s Center for World Religions, Diplomacy, and Conflict Resolution. Qabawat is also a member of the High Negotiations Committee for Syria in Geneva. Qabawat founded the Syrian Center for Dialogue, Peace, and Reconciliation in Toronto.
- **Maher Alloush:** Alloush is Sunni and close to Ahrar al Sham, which is an Islamist opposition group that has been close to HTS and its predecessor organizations since the mid-2010s.[13] Alloush previously mediated an internal dispute in Ahrar al Sham that resulted in the appointment of Abu Obeida as leader of Ahrar al Sham in January 2019.[14] Alloush met with Shara in December 2024.[15]
- **Mustafa Musa:** Musa is a member of HTS and served as the head of the SSG Shura Council from April 2020 until the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024.[16] Musa, who is a trained pharmacist, also previously headed the SSG Shura Council health committee.[17]
- **Mohammad Mastat:** Mastat previously served as the director of primary healthcare in the SSG Health Ministry.[18] Mastat is affiliated with Faylaq al Sham, which is a Muslim Brotherhood-influenced Islamist militia that has been a longtime HTS partner.[19]
- **Huda al Attasi:** Attasi is a Turkish citizen and is the co-founder and director of International Humanitarian Relief.[20] Attasi has spent years helping Syrian women, orphans, and displaced individuals. Attasi is a founding member of the Syrian Association for Citizens’ Dignity, which advocates for the rights of displaced Syrians.[21]

The Syrian interim government has continued to attempt to consolidate its control over groups in southern Syria that have not yet joined the Defense Ministry. Syrian Interim Defense Minister Marhaf Abu Qasra met with southern military commanders Naseem Abu Ara and Ali Bash in Damascus on February 12.[22] Ali Bash is the deputy of Ahmed al Awda, the current Southern Operations Room commander who previously led the Eighth Brigade, a group comprised of former opposition fighters who reconciled with the Assad regime and reorganized themselves as the “Eighth Brigade.”[23] Abu Ara is an Eighth Brigade commander.[24] An unspecified source told southern Syria-based media that Abu Ara and Bash agreed to hold future meetings with Damascus to “follow up” on steps to integrate Southern Operations Room fighters into the Syrian Defense Ministry. Qasra recently told the Wall Street Journal that Awda had resisted attempts to bring his units under the Defense Ministry.[25] Abu Ara denied Qasra’s allegations in a video statement on February 10 and argued that the people of the south were among the first to call for the Defense Ministry’s establishment.[26] Qasra’s meeting with Abu Ara and Ali Bash suggests that southern leaders, such as Awda, will continue to discuss their integration into the Defense Ministry, although it does not appear that Awda or his subordinates have made any explicit commitments.

The HTS-led Department of Military Operations also deployed to western Suwayda Province for the first time on February 12.[27] The government forces deployed to “contain tensions” following the murder of a Syrian man in al Thaala.[28] This is the Syrian government’s first official deployment in Suwayda Province.[29] The *Wall Street Journal* reported that the Men of Dignity Movement--a prominent Druze militia based in Suwayda--has thus far prevented the entry of HTS-led forces into Suwayda Province.[30] The head of the Men of Dignity Movement, Sheikh Abu Hassan Yahya al Hajjar, announced that the movement will cooperate with the Interior Ministry’s new police and security forces.[31] It is unclear if Damascus and the Men of Dignity or another group coordinated the deployment of the Military Operations Department. The Syrian interim government likely seeks to cultivate goodwill among Suwayda residents by showing its abilities to ensure security in the region, however.

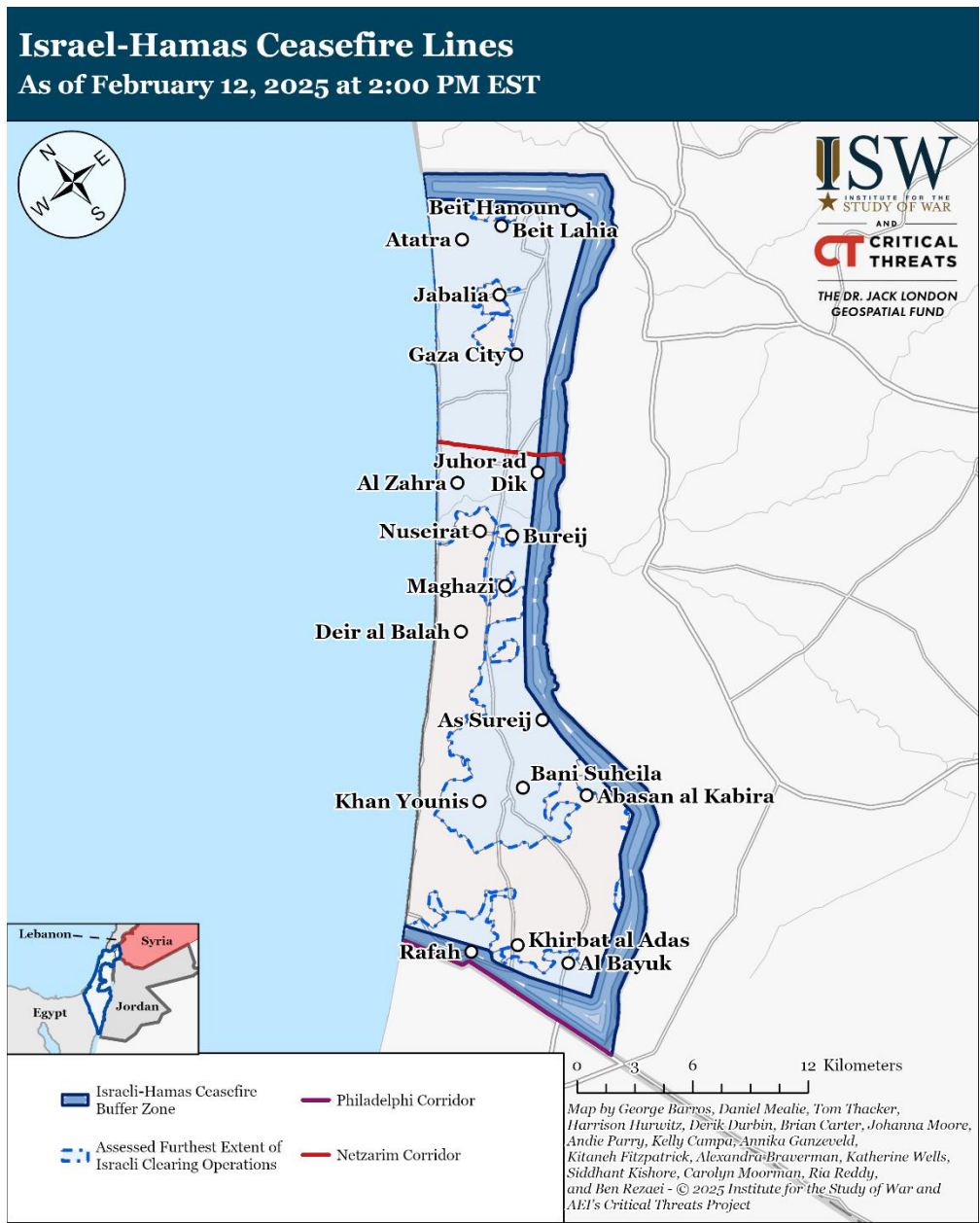
Syrian Interim President Ahmed al Shara held his first official call with Russian President Vladimir Putin on February 12, suggesting that Syria seeks to maintain a future relationship with Russia even as Russia withdraws its military assets from Syria. The Kremlin reported that Putin and Shara discussed recent negotiations over Russian basing rights in Syria between the Syrian government and the Russian delegation that visited Damascus on January 28.[32] This delegation failed to reach an agreement with the Syrian government.[33] It does not appear that Shara’s call with Putin led to any agreement on Russia’s continued military presence at Hmeimim Air Base and the Port of Tartus. The direct communication between Shara and Putin, however, suggests that the Syrian interim government will continue to attempt to maintain a relationship with the Russian government and that negotiations over Russia’s presence in Syria have not concluded. Senior Syrian officials have adopted a more positive position towards Russia in recent days, even as Russian forces have continued to withdraw from Syrian territory.[34] Shara stressed Syria’s “strong strategic relationship” with Russia during the phone call with Putin, according to an official Syrian government report, and Interim Syrian Defense Minister Marhaf Abu Qasra recently suggested that Syria is open to Russian air and naval bases in Syria if there are “benefits” for Syria.[35] Syrian officials’ public posture towards Russia suggests that Syria will continue to engage with Russia, particularly as Syrian officials hope Western countries will lift sanctions imposed upon the Assad regime. Putin stressed the need to lift economic sanctions on Syria during the call, echoing a recent call from Russian Deputy Foreign Minister and Special Presidential Representative for the Middle East and North Africa Mikhail Bogdanov on several unspecified countries to lift all unilateral sanctions imposed on Syria.[36] Syria could use its continued engagement with Russia as leverage with the West as Syria attempts to secure sanctions relief from the West.

Assessed Control of Terrain in Syria February 12, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



Egyptian state media reported on February 12 that mediators from Egypt and Qatar are “intensifying” diplomatic efforts to prevent the breakdown of Israel-Hamas ceasefire agreement.[37] Unspecified Egyptian sources told *Reuters* that Qatar and Egypt discussed efforts to prevent the collapse of the Israel-Hamas ceasefire on February 12.[38] Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu threatened on February 11 to resume military operations in the Gaza Strip after Hamas said it would postpone the planned release of Israeli hostages on February 15, which would violate the ceasefire.[39] A third IDF division entered the buffer zone along the Israel-Gaza Strip boundary on February 11, and the IDF recalled reservists as part of preparations for resumed operations in the Gaza Strip.[40] Israeli officials have indicated that Israel will continue to meet its obligations under the first phase of the ceasefire if Hamas releases Israeli hostages on February 15, however.[41]

Jordanian King Abdullah II agreed to accept 2,000 sick Gazan children but refused to host additional Palestinian refugees during a meeting with US President Donald Trump in Washington, DC, on January 11.[42] King Abdullah II stated that "everyone" should prioritize rebuilding the Gaza Strip.[43] Egypt and Jordan are developing a plan to rebuild the Gaza Strip without relocating Gazans.[44]



Key Takeaways:

- **Syrian Transition:** Syrian Interim President Ahmed al Shara formed a preparatory committee on February 12 that is mostly comprised of pro-HTS individuals who are loyal to Shara. The composition of this committee suggests that it will likely make decisions that align with Shara’s views and objectives.
- **Syrian Defense Ministry:** The Syrian interim government has continued to attempt to consolidate its control over groups in southern Syria that have not yet joined the Defense Ministry. The HTS-led Department of Military Operations also deployed to western Suwayda Province for the first time on February 12.
- **Syria-Russia Relations:** Syrian Interim President Ahmed al Shara held his first official call with Russian President Vladimir Putin on February 12, suggesting that Syria seeks to maintain a future relationship with Russia even as Russia withdraws its military assets from Syria.
- **Gaza Strip:** Egyptian state media reported on February 12 that mediators from Egypt and Qatar are “intensifying” diplomatic efforts to prevent the breakdown of the Israel-Hamas ceasefire agreement.

Syria

Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) executive committee member Murat Karayilan said that the PKK must hold a conference to discuss disarmament before imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan can call on the PKK to disarm.[45] Ocalan is expected to make an imminent “historic” call for the PKK to disarm on February 15.[46] Karayilan’s statement conflicts with Turkey’s theory that Ocalan will call for disarmament on February 15 and that the call will pressure the SDF to integrate into the Syrian Defense Ministry. CTP-ISW assessed on January 28 that the SDF is unlikely to willingly give up its ability to defend Kurdish areas against active Turkish-backed military attacks, regardless of Ocalan’s position.[47]

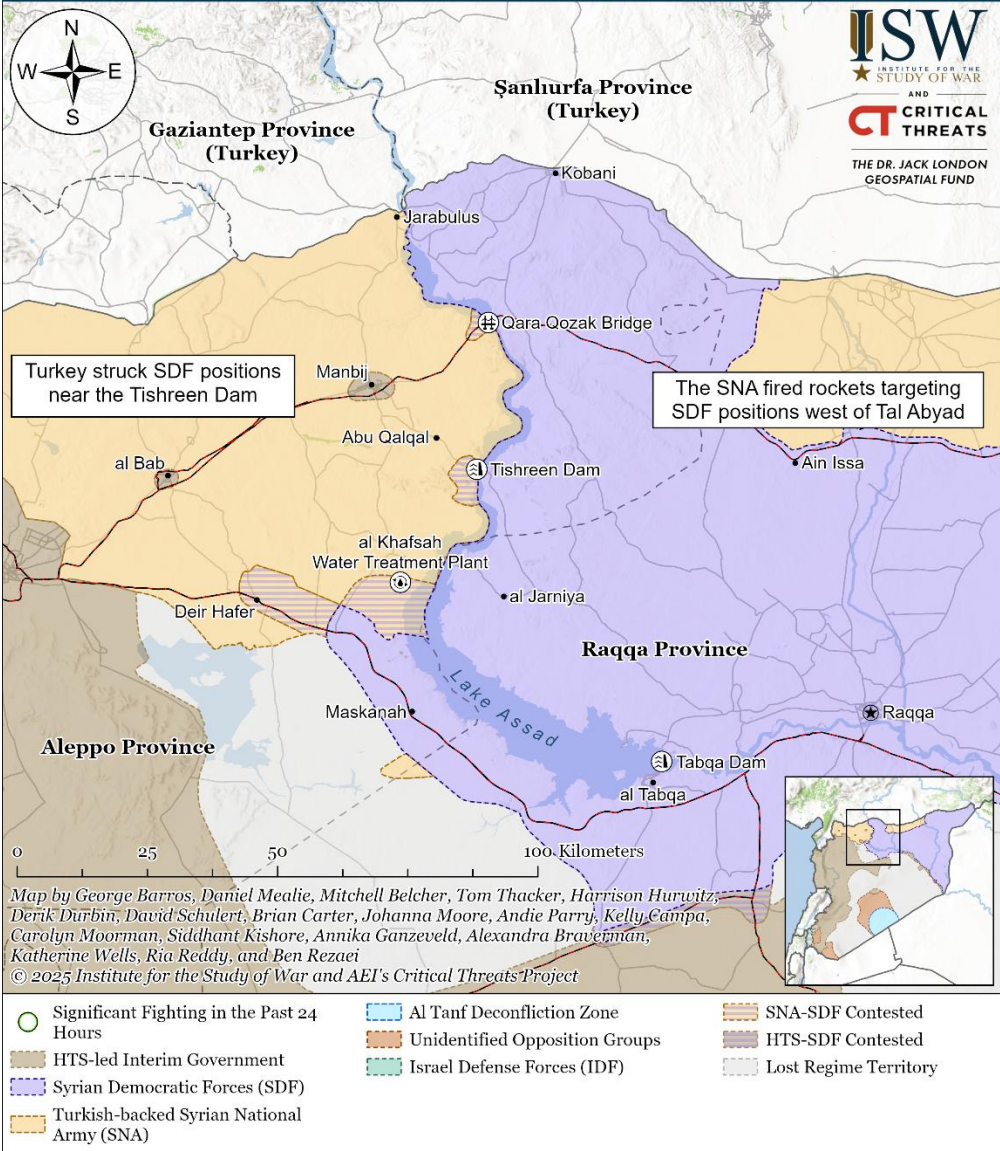
Turkey continued to target SDF positions along the western bank of the Euphrates River on February 12.[48] Turkish aircraft struck several SDF positions along the western bank of the Euphrates River on February 12.[49] Turkish aircraft also struck SDF positions near the Qara Qozak Bridge and Tishreen Dam, likely to isolate SDF units operating at the bridgehead.[50]

Anti-SDF media reported that Turkey and the SNA continued to target SDF positions with airstrikes and rockets along the Peace Spring frontlines.[51] Turkish aircraft struck a reported SDF position at a power station near Ain Issa on February 12.[52] The SNA also fired rockets targeting SDF positions west of Tal Abyad on February 12.[53]

ISIS fighters may have attacked an SDF-affiliated municipality center near al Karamah, Raqqa Province, on February 11.[54] The SDF deployed forces to the area following the attack.[55] This is the third time that unspecified individuals attacked SDF positions in al Karamah since February 7.[56] ISIS has long had a presence around Al Karamah. The SDF arrested an ISIS smuggler in al Karamah in November 2023, for example.[57]

Assessed Control of Terrain around Manbij

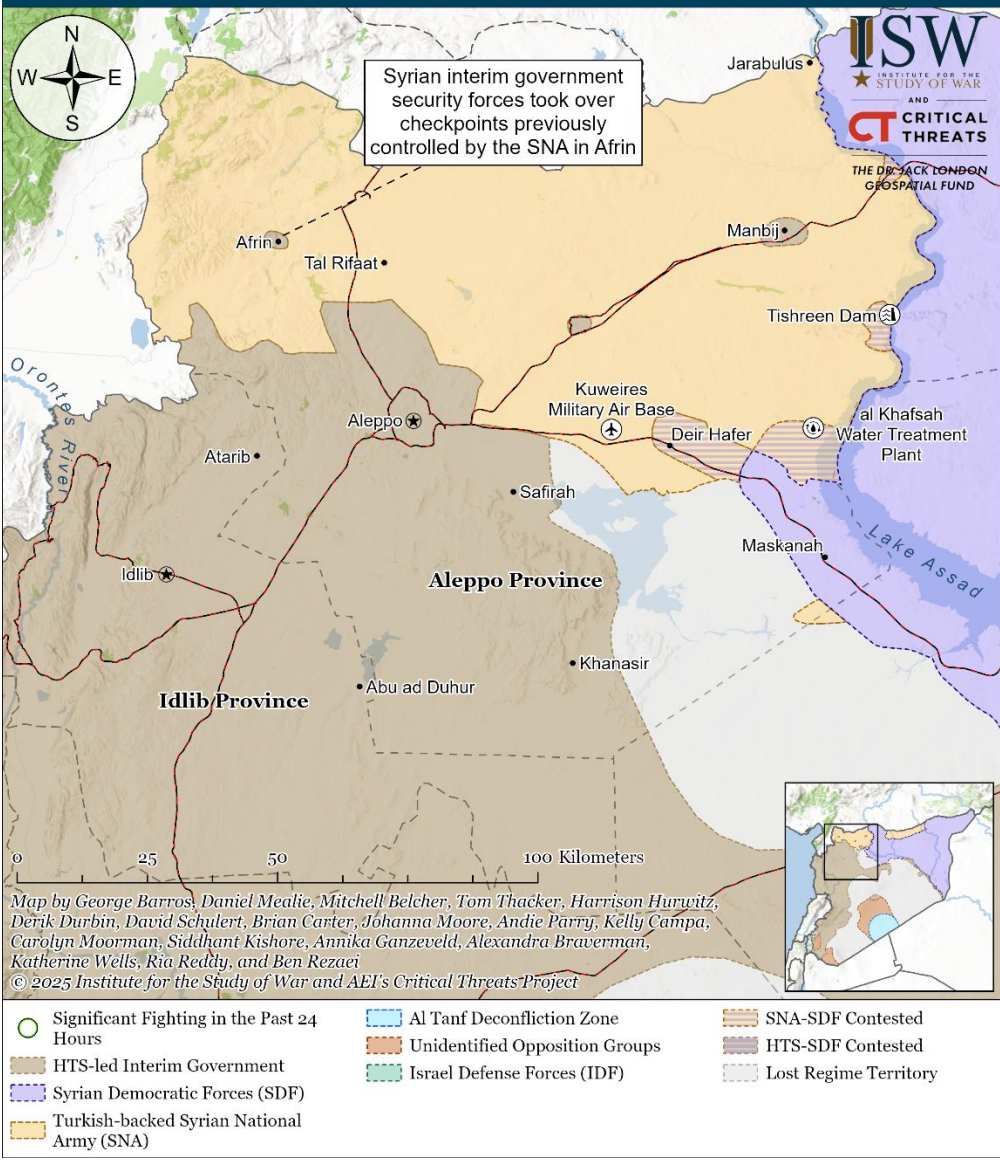
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Syrian media reported on February 12 that Syrian interim government forces started to seize checkpoints at the entrance to Afrin, an area that the Turkish-backed SNA previously controlled.[58] Interim government security forces deployed to Afrin and Jandairis, north of Aleppo, on February 6.[59] The SNA has controlled and administered these areas since 2018.[60] CTP-ISW assessed on February 6 that these interim government deployments will likely continue as former opposition groups integrate into the Syrian Ministry of Defense.[61]

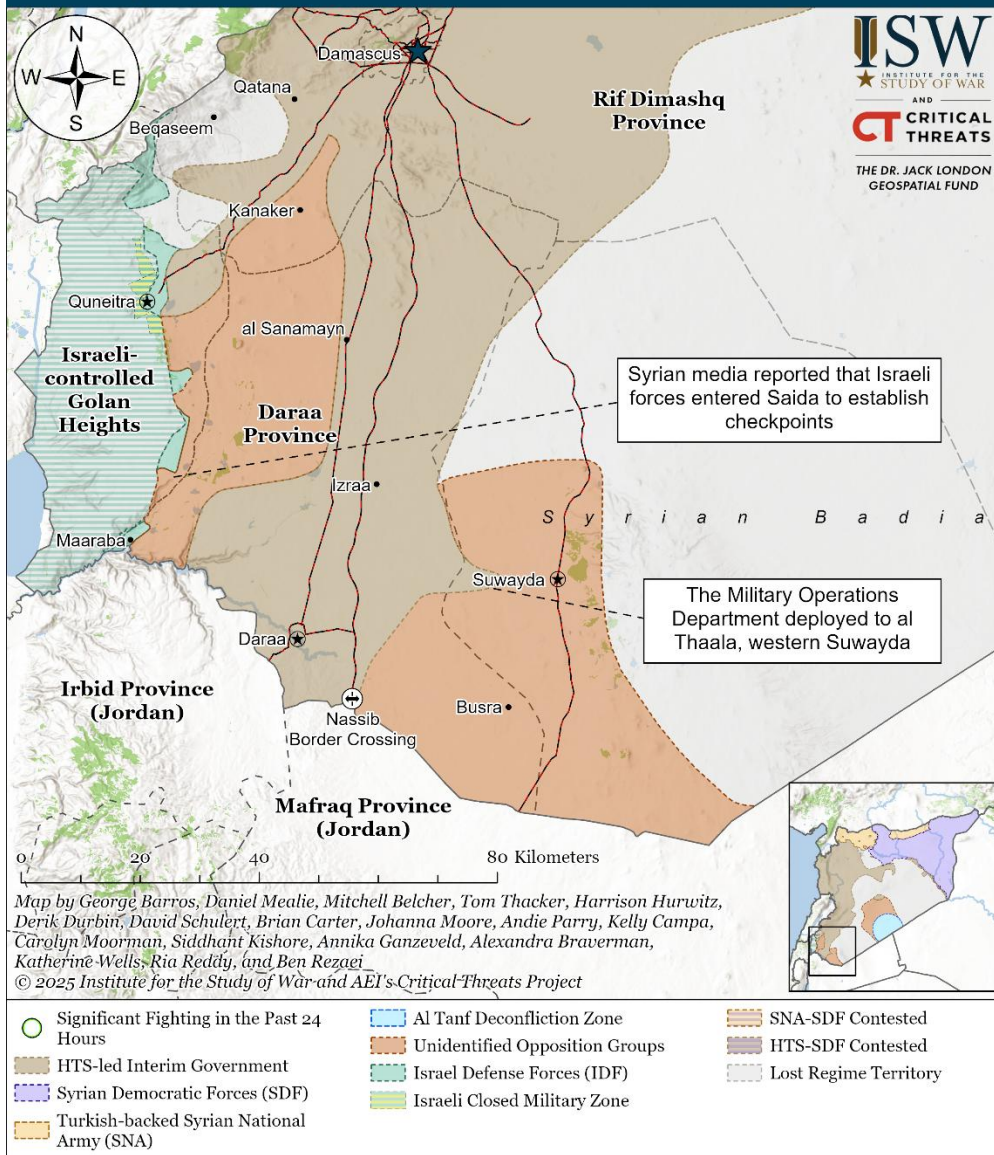
Assessed Control of Terrain around Aleppo

February 12, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



The IDF continued to operate along the Golan Heights in southern Syria. Syrian media reported that Israeli forces entered Saida to establish checkpoints along the Syria-Israel border on February 11.^[62] Syrian media also reported that the IDF advanced toward Kodna, Quneitra Province.^[63]

Assessed Control of Terrain in Southwestern Syria February 12, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



Two leading Syrian opposition groups agreed to dissolve and join the Syrian interim government on February 11.^[64] The Syrian National Coalition and the Syrian Negotiation Commission agreed to dissolve and work with the Syrian interim government after meeting with Shara. A Turkish analyst reported that Shara had declined to meet with Syrian National Coalition head Hadi al Bahra “for a while.”^[65] The Syrian National Coalition has long worked with various opposition groups and umbrella organizations of opposition groups.^[66] The Syrian National Coalition announced its willingness to work with the HTS-led interim government in December 2024.^[67] The Syrian Negotiation Commission is an umbrella institution created to negotiate on behalf of the Syrian opposition with the Assad regime within the framework of UNSCR 2254.^[68]

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

Unspecified fighters detonated an adhesive improvised explosive device (IED) that they had attached to a vehicle in al Qaim, Anbar Province, Iraq, on February 12, possibly as part of an internal dispute among Iraqi smuggling groups.[69] The attack targeted Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) Tribal Mobilization 1st al Qaim Regiment Commander Salam Suleiman al Mahlawi.[70] The Iraqi government formed the Tribal Mobilization forces as part of the PMF in 2014. Sunnis and other minority groups make up the Tribal Mobilization.[71] Iraqi police arrested a relative of Mahlawi in June 2024 for smuggling after the police discovered weapons, ammunition, and narcotics in his home.[72] The al Qaim border crossing is a major smuggling route used by Iranian-backed militias and other actors to transport goods and narcotics to the Gulf states and to Europe.[73]

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

Houthi Foreign Minister Jamal Amer said on February 2 that the Houthis did not cause the explosion on a Hong Kong-flagged container ship in the Red Sea on January 28, 2025.[74] Amer said that the Houthis will not resume attacks on vessels in the Red Sea unless the Israel-Hamas ceasefire collapses.[75] Amer added that the ship was carrying 1290 tons of unspecified hazardous material to Jeddah Port in Saudi Arabia and suggested that the material caused the explosion. Amer also called on the international community to conduct a transparent investigation into the incident. An unspecified maritime source also told Reuters on January 29 that the cause of the fire was the hazardous cargo on board.[76] The Red Sea and Gulf of Aden Joint Maritime Information Center has only reported one non-attack-related incident for vessels transiting the Red Sea since the start of 2025, which is likely [this](#) incident.[77] CTP-ISW has not observed any Houthi attacks on commercial vessels in the Red Sea since November 2024.[78]

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 _____ *Gaza* _____ *Strip*

See the topline section.

Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip

As of February 12, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



Map by George Barros, Daniel Mealie, Tom Thacker, Harrison Hurwitz, Derik Durbin, Brian Carter, Johanna Moore, Andie Parry, Kelly Campa, Annika Ganzeveld, Kitaneh Fitzpatrick, Alexandra Braverman, Katherine Wells, Siddhant Kishore, Carolyn Moorman, Ria Reddy, and Ben Rezaei - © 2025 Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project

Reported Israeli Clearing Operations*	IDF-Declared Humanitarian Corridors in Gaza	Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours	
Claimed Furthest Israeli Advances	Netzarim Corridor	Al-Mawasi Humanitarian Zone	
Assessed Furthest Extent of Israeli Clearing Operations	Philadelphi Corridor		

* ISW-CTP's "Reported Israeli Clearing Operations" layer uses the US military's doctrinal definition of clearing which is an operation that "requires the commander to remove all enemy forces and eliminate organized resistance within an assigned area." Clearing operations frequently take weeks and sometimes months to complete

Lebanon

Lebanese media reported that the IDF has destroyed infrastructure in seven towns in southern Lebanon since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on February 11.[79]

Lebanese media reported on February 12 that the IDF shelled unspecified targets in the Shebaa Valley.[80]

Lebanese media reported on February 12 that the IDF established a “military center” near Houla.[81]

Lebanon main

An Israeli Army Radio correspondent reported on February 12 that the IDF is establishing a new territorial brigade along the Israel-Lebanon border ahead of the IDF withdrawal from Lebanon.[82] This brigade will be larger than brigades that previously served on the border before the Israel-Lebanon war. The extended ceasefire agreement requires Israel to withdraw by February 18.[83]

IDF Northern Command Commander Major General Ori Gordin stated on February 12 that he believes the IDF will withdraw from southern Lebanon by February 18.[84] IDF Northern Command is responsible for maintaining border security on the Israel-Lebanon border.[85] Gordin separately stated that the IDF severely damaged Hezbollah’s intelligence-gathering capabilities and ability to rearm itself through Syria.[86] Gordin stated that the IDF eliminated the “serious threat” posed by Hezbollah to residents of northern Israel. Gordin stressed that the biggest challenge the IDF faces in northern Israel is to maintain the current security status quo.

West

Bank

The IDF continued its counterterrorism operation in the northern West Bank on February 12.[87] The IDF continued to destroy Palestinian militia infrastructure and seize weapons. Israeli forces clashed with militia fighters in Nour Shams refugee camp and killed one fighter in Tulkarm.[88] The IDF stated that fighters injured an Israeli soldier.[89] Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and the al Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades attacked Israeli forces in Tulkarm and Jenin governorates with small arms and improvised explosive devices (IED) on February 12.[90] PIJ, Hamas, and the al Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades claimed that they conducted combined small arms attacks targeting the IDF in Tulkarm on February 11 and 12.[91] PIJ announced on January 22 the formation of joint operations rooms in the West Bank with Hamas and al Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades fighters.[92]

Iranian Decision-Making, Internal Dynamics, and Foreign Policy

US sanctions on Iranian entities and vessels involved in Iranian oil shipments to China have made it more difficult for Iran to export oil to China. Reuters reported that Iran has struggled to acquire new vessels to replace those sanctioned by the United States.[93] A British shipbroker reported that the United States has sanctioned 57 percent of the 126 oil tankers involved in Iranian crude oil trade to China.[94] China's Shandong Port Group also banned sanctioned tankers from ports in Shandong Province on January 6, where many of the sanctioned vessels unloaded

Iranian oil.[95] This has made it impossible for Iran to trade tens of millions of barrels of oil and has left the oil in floating storage. This situation may worsen under US President Donald Trump’s “maximum pressure” policy, which targets Iranian oil sales.[96] These oil shipment disruptions have caused Iranian crude oil prices to rise. One of the attractions of Iranian oil to China is its cheap cost.[97] A decrease in Iranian oil exports to China could badly damage the Iranian economy, which relies heavily on oil exports.

Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei’s rejection of direct negotiations with the United States may have caused further devaluation of the rial. Iranian opposition media reported that Iran’s currency fell to its lowest value, reaching nearly 940,000 rials per USD on February 10, after Khamenei’s recent speech on February 7 about negotiations with the United States.[98]

Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei visited the Iran Armed Forces exhibition “Eghtedar 1403” in Tehran on February 12.[99] The exhibition displayed equipment and new technologies in air defense, ballistic and cruise missiles, drones, and naval vessels. Khamenei emphasized the importance of continuous innovation in defense.[100] Khamenei separately met with officials and experts in the defense industry and emphasized the importance of national defense and security. Khamenei’s visit likely highlights Iranian efforts to address air defense vulnerabilities and reinforce military capabilities amid potential external threats, particularly in light of recent setbacks for the Axis of Resistance.[101]

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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[3] <https://www.alarabiya.net/arab-and-world/syria/2024/12/29/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B1%D8%B9-%D9%84%D9%85-%D8%A3%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%B1-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%88%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%B8%D9%8A%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%82%D8%AF-%D9%8A%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%BA%D8%B1%D9%82-4-%D8%B3%D9%86%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AA-> ;

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[8] <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2022/09/two-movements-in-national-army-consensus-only-in-statements-eyes-on-tahrir-al-sham/>

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[14] https://www.syria_dot_tv/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%AE-%D8%A3%D8%A8%D9%88-%D8%B9%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%8B-%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%A9-%D8%A3%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%A7%D9%85

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