

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.

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 is conducting nuclear research that would enable it to build a nuclear weapon in a period of months. The *New York Times* reported on February 3 that a "secret team" of Iranian weapons engineers and scientists is "exploring" a faster approach to build a nuclear weapon in a "matter of months."^[1] The engineers and scientists could be from the Organization of Defense Innovation and Research (SPND), which, under a different name, played a leading role in the Iranian nuclear weapons research program before 2003. The new approach would decrease the time Iran needs to turn weapons-grade uranium (uranium enriched to 90 percent) into a nuclear weapon. This approach would significantly reduce the time that the International Atomic Energy Agency would have to detect Iranian weaponization activity. It would also reduce the time that the United States or Israel would have to take military action against Iranian nuclear facilities. Iran currently possesses near weapons-grade uranium (uranium enriched to 60 percent), but Western estimates indicate that Iran could further enrich this material to weapons-grade levels within days. Unspecified US officials said that Iran could build an "older-style nuclear weapon" using the new approach, but that such a weapon would not fit on a ballistic missile and would likely be less reliable than a modern weapon. **CTP-ISW does not assess that Iran has decided to build a nuclear weapon at this time.**

Iran's nuclear weapons research comes as Israel has eroded key elements of Iran's deterrence since October 2024. The IDF has defeated Hamas in the Gaza Strip and degraded Hezbollah.^[2] The IDF also disabled Iranian air defenses and disrupted Iranian missile production capabilities in its airstrikes on Iran in October 2024.^[3] The *New York Times* reported that Iran is exploring "new options" to deter US or Israeli strikes, citing unspecified intelligence.^[4] Some Iranian

hardliners have publicly called for Iran to acquire a nuclear weapon to restore deterrence vis-a-vis Israel.[5] CTP-ISW has previously observed that some Iranian hardliners are trying to pressure the Supreme Leader to revoke his 2003 fatwa that bans the production and use of nuclear weapons.

US President Donald Trump ordered the re-enforcement of “maximum pressure” sanctions on Iran on February 4 to dissuade Iran from pursuing a nuclear weapon. Trump signed an executive order that targets Iranian oil sales to other countries.[6] Trump previously withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action and imposed “maximum pressure” sanctions on Iran during his first term as president. Trump told reporters that he is open to a deal with Iran and would be willing to meet with Iranian officials.

“Maximum pressure” sanctions will likely cause further deterioration of the Iranian economy. The Iranian budget relies heavily on oil export revenues. Iran previously exported around 2.5 million barrels of oil per day in April 2018—one month before Trump withdrew the United States from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.[7] Iranian oil exports fell dramatically in the following years, but oil exports began to slowly increase beginning in 2020, though Iran still only exported 400,000 barrels per day in 2020.[8] Iran will likely try to continue to export oil illicitly but will likely not be able to maintain current oil export levels.[9] Oil exports are also insufficient to resolve the underlying issues that plague the Iranian economy. These issues will remain regardless of the imposition of sanctions. These economic issues include widespread corruption, nepotism, and the outsized role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and parastatal foundations, known as *bonyads*, in the [10]economy.[11]

Iran is attempting to improve its air defense abilities possibly in preparation for a conventional conflict with the United States or Israel. Iranian Armed Forces General Staff Chief Major General Mohammad Bagheri, with the approval of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, appointed Artesh Air Defense Force Commander Brigadier General Alireza Sabahi Fard as the commander of the Khatam ol Anbia Air Defense Headquarters on February 4.[12] Sabahi Fard will continue to serve as the Artesh Air Defense Force commander as well. Sabahi Fard replaced Brigadier General Ghader Rahim Zadeh, who had commanded the Khatam ol Anbia Air Defense Headquarters since April 2021.[13] Khamenei appointed Rahim Zadeh as an adviser to Artesh Commander Major General Abdol Rahim Mousavi.[14] Iran established the Khatam ol Anbia Air Defense Headquarters in 2008. Khamenei restructured the Iranian air defense structure in 2019, delegating air defense operations to the Artesh Air Defense Force and elevating the Khatam ol Anbia Air Defense Headquarters to a higher echelon of command. The Khatam ol Anbia Air Defense Headquarters is responsible for coordinating air defense activity between the Artesh and IRGC. Sabahi Fard previously commanded the Khatam ol Anbia Air Defense Headquarters from May 2018 to May 2019 before Khamenei restructured it.[15]

These military leadership changes come as Iran has conducted several air defense exercises in recent weeks, specifically around Iranian nuclear facilities.[16] The Artesh Air Defense Force most recently conducted an exercise in southwestern Iran on February 4.[17] The Artesh Air Defense Force tested Iranian-made radar systems, an expanded surveillance network, and the “Majid” and “Joshan” missile systems, which Iranian media claims can intercept a large-scale drone attack.[18] These exercises

reflect Iran’s efforts to strengthen its air defense capabilities and concerns about a potential conventional conflict with the United States or Israel.

An Israeli delegation will travel to Doha on February 8 and 9 to negotiate the second phase of the Israel-Hamas ceasefire-hostage agreement.[19] The Israeli Prime Minister’s Office announced that the delegation would travel to Doha after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met with US Special Envoy to the Middle East Steve Witkoff in Washington, DC on February 4. The ceasefire agreement required Israel and Hamas to begin negotiations for the second phase on February 3.[20] Reuters reported on January 19 that the second phase of the ceasefire "is expected" to include the release of the remaining Israeli hostages, a complete Israel Defense Forces withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, and a permanent ceasefire.[21]



Syrian Interim President Ahmed al Shara discussed Syrian-Turkish defense coordination with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Ankara, Turkey, on February 4.[22] Shara announced that Syria is forming a “joint strategy” with Turkey to confront regional security threats and ensure lasting stability in the two countries.[23] Neither Shara nor Erdogan provided details about this strategy. Several unspecified officials and security sources told Reuters on February 4 that Shara and Erdogan would likely discuss the creation of a joint defense pact that would allow Turkey to use airbases in the central Syrian desert and take a “lead role” in training the new Syrian army.[24] Shara and Erdogan did not announce a defense pact during their joint press conference.

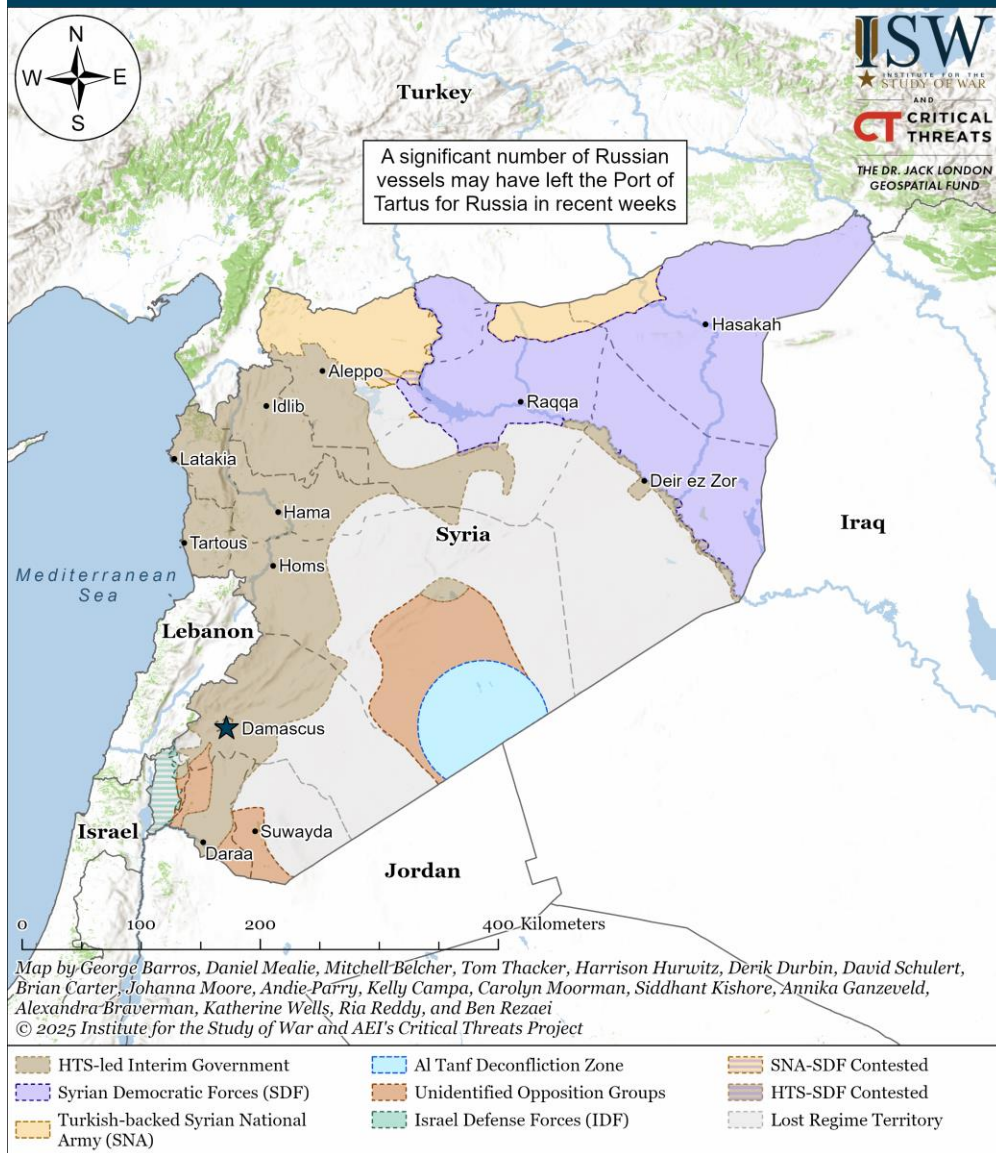
A defense pact between Syria and Turkey would be consistent with current Syrian objectives. Syrian leaders have said that they will pursue “strategic relations” with Turkey and have frequently included Turkish-backed factions and commanders in meetings about the establishment of the new Syrian government and military.[25] The presence of Turkish forces at Syrian airbases in the central Syrian desert would in theory enable Turkey to defend Syrian airspace in the event of a future attack, according to several officials, including one Syrian security official.[26] The Assad regime previously acquired and used Russian and Iranian air defense systems, such as the Russian Pantsir missile system.[27] Israeli airstrikes before and after the fall of the regime likely destroyed the majority of these systems.[28] The Syrian government is likely eager to obtain temporary Turkish protection from potential threats in the absence of a functional military and active air defense systems. The new Syrian army also needs military equipment and training, both of which Russia and Iran previously provided to Assad’s Syrian Arab Army (SAA).[29] Syrian Interim Defense Minister Marhaf Abu Qasra noted during a recent interview that the Defense Ministry needs critical “infrastructure” to repair or replace aircraft, tanks, and radars.[30] The new Syrian army units, which the interim government is forming from various armed factions, will require training to become organized and disciplined units.

A defense pact between Syria and Turkey would similarly enable Turkey to pursue its strategic objectives in Syria by increasing its influence in Syria. Turkish officials have repeatedly stated that Turkey seeks to “eliminate” the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).[31] An unspecified regional intelligence official stated that Turkey seeks to establish airbases at Palmyra military airport and the Tiyas airbase to send a “message” to the People’s Protection Units (YPG) in northern Syria.[32]

Formalized Turkish military involvement in Syria would also likely be part of Turkey and HTS’s efforts to coerce the SDF to integrate into the Syrian Defense Ministry. Shara and Erdogan likely discussed recent developments in HTS’s ongoing negotiations with the SDF. Shara recently told Western media that he is not very optimistic about the possibility of an agreement with the SDF but that negotiations continue.[33] Imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan is expected to make an imminent “historic call” for the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) to disarm. Turkish officials expect that such a call would pressure the SDF into an agreement to disarm and integrate into the HTS-led interim government.[34] Turkey has repeatedly threatened to conduct a military offensive into northern Syria in order to “eliminate” the SDF but has refrained from doing so while HTS negotiates with the SDF. HTS and Turkey may calculate that a formal Turkey-Syria defense agreement and an increased Turkish military presence in Syria could pressure the SDF to concede to HTS and Turkish demands. The SDF is unlikely to disarm, however, as it actively engages Turkey and the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army in northern Syria.

A significant number of Russian vessels that had been at the Port of Tartus in recent weeks may have left Syria for Russia as Russian-Syrian negotiations about Russia's continued access to its bases in Syria reportedly continue. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov claimed on February 3 that Russian and Syrian authorities will continue contact on "all issues," including Russia's continued access to the Port of Tartus.[35] Data from MarineTraffic.com showed that the Russian *Sparta* and *Sparta II* cargo ships were off the coast of Tunisia on February 4.[36] OSINT analyst MT Anderson posted satellite imagery from the morning of February 4 showing the *Sparta* and *Sparta II*, as well as potentially the *Alexander Otrakovsky* Ropucha-class landing ship, the *Admiral Golovko* Admiral Gorshkov-class frigate, and the *Admiral Grigorovich* Grigorovich-class frigate off the coast of Tunisia.[37] Satellite imagery and reports from Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) indicated that all these vessels had been at the Port of Tartus in December 2024 and January 2025.[38] The departure of a significant number of vessels from the Port of Tartus suggests that the Kremlin is not optimistic about the results of ongoing Russian-Syrian negotiations. The location of the vessels off the coast of Tunisia also suggests that these ships are not bound for Libya, though Russia sent some assets from Syria to Libya by air in December 2024 and January 2025, as the Critical Threats Project's (CTP) Africa File previously reported.[39] The Ukrainian Ministry of Defense's Resistance Center reported on February 4 that Russian ships began evacuating weapons from the Port of Tartus on January 27, and satellite imagery collected on January 18 and 27 showed that the Russian military had loaded equipment onto the *Sparta* and *Sparta II* at Tartus.[40] The Ukrainian Resistance Center noted that the *Sparta II* turned off its automatic identification system (AIS) after leaving Syria—a common practice among ships in Russia's "shadow fleet." [41]

Assessed Control of Terrain in Syria February 4, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



Key Takeaways:

- **Iranian Nuclear Program:** Iran is conducting nuclear research that would enable it to build a nuclear weapon in a period of months. CTP-ISW does not assess that Iran has decided to build a nuclear weapon at this time. Iran’s nuclear weapons research comes as Israel has eroded key elements of Iran’s deterrence since October 2024.
- **Maximum Pressure:** US President Donald Trump ordered the re-enforcement of “maximum pressure” sanctions on Iran on February 4 to dissuade Iran from pursuing a nuclear weapon. “Maximum pressure” sanctions will likely cause further deterioration of the Iranian economy.
- **Iranian Air Defense:** Iran is attempting to improve its air defense abilities possibly in preparation for a conventional conflict with the United States or Israel. These military leadership

changes come as Iran has conducted several air defense exercises in recent weeks, specifically around Iranian nuclear facilities.

- **Gaza Strip Ceasefire:** An Israeli delegation will travel to Doha on February 8 and 9 to negotiate the second phase of the Israel-Hamas ceasefire-hostage agreement.
- **Syria-Turkey Relations:** Syrian Interim President Ahmed al Shara discussed Syrian-Turkish defense coordination with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Ankara, Turkey, on February 4. A defense pact between Syria and Turkey would be consistent with current Syrian objectives, and it would similarly enable Turkey to pursue its strategic objectives in Syria by increasing its influence in Syria.
- **Russia in Syria:** A significant number of Russian vessels that had been at the Port of Tartus in recent weeks may have left Syria for Russia as Russian-Syrian negotiations about Russia's continued access to its bases in Syria reportedly continue.

Syria

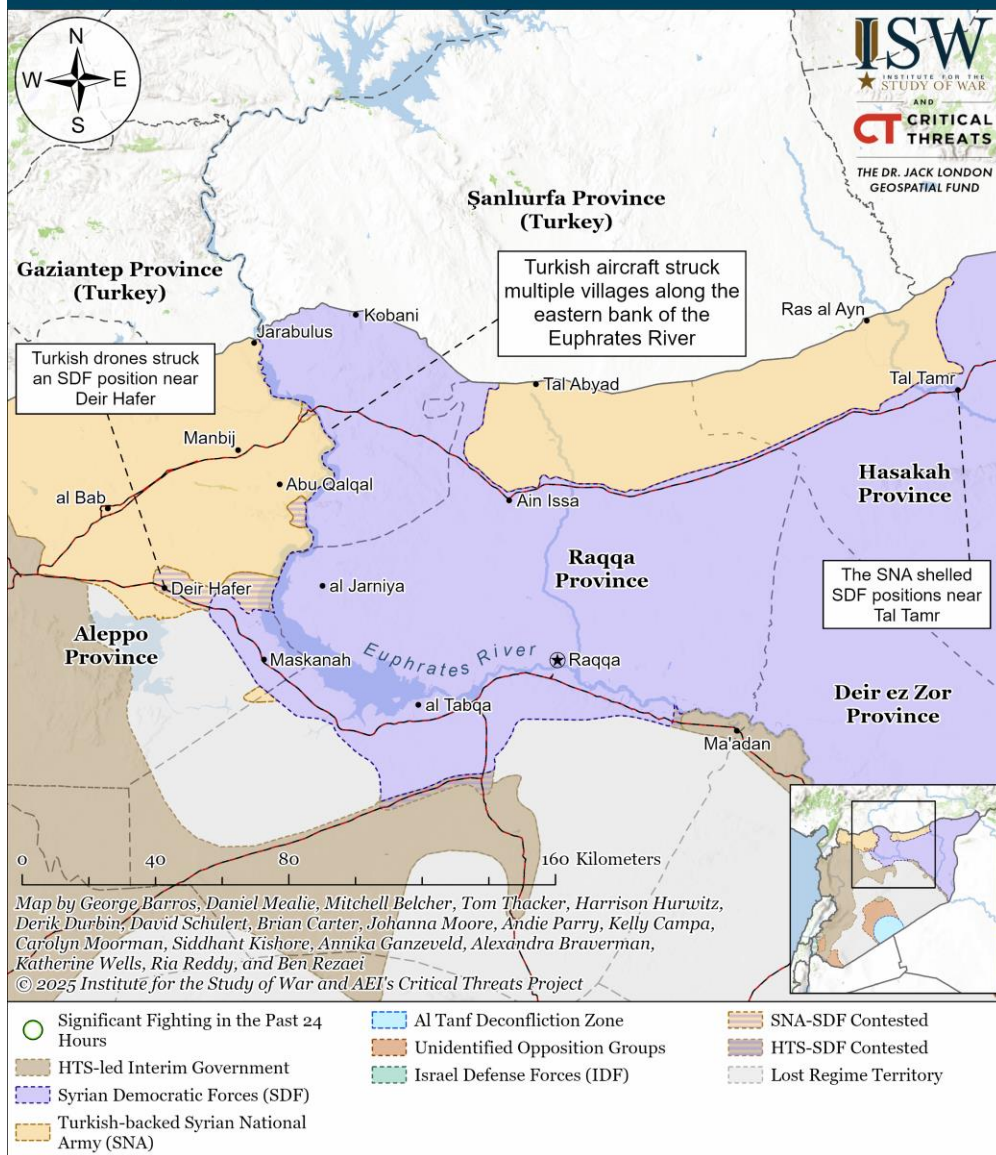
Turkey continued to target SDF positions with airstrikes and artillery along key ground lines of communication to isolate the SDF at Qara Qozak Bridge.[42] The SDF reported on February 4 that Turkish aircraft struck multiple villages along the eastern bank of the Euphrates River, including Ghasq, al Tineh, Dukan, Jaada, and Sarrin.[43] The SDF also reported that Turkish artillery shelled villages near Qara Qozak Bridge.[44] Turkish airstrikes have concentrated recent attacks on SDF positions east of the Qara Qozak Bridge, likely to isolate SDF units operating at the bridgehead.[45]

The SDF reported that Turkish drones struck an SDF position near Deir Hafer on February 4.[46] The SDF reported that the drone strikes killed two SDF fighters.[47] Turkey has targeted SDF positions in and around Deir Hafer in recent days.[48]

The SDF attacked SNA forces near the Qara Qozak Bridge and Tishreen Dam on February 4.[49] The SDF spokesperson reported that the SDF conducted an operation that targeted two separate groups of SNA fighters near Tishreen Dam.[50] The SDF killed two SNA fighters during the operation.[51] The SDF also reported that SDF destroyed unspecified SNA sites near Qara Qozak Hill.[52] Turkey conducted several airstrikes that targeted SDF units near the Tishreen Dam.[53]

Anti-SDF media reported on February 4 that the SNA shelled SDF positions near Tal Tamr along the SNA-SDF frontline in Hasakah Province.[54]

Assessed Control of Terrain in Northern Syria February 4, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST

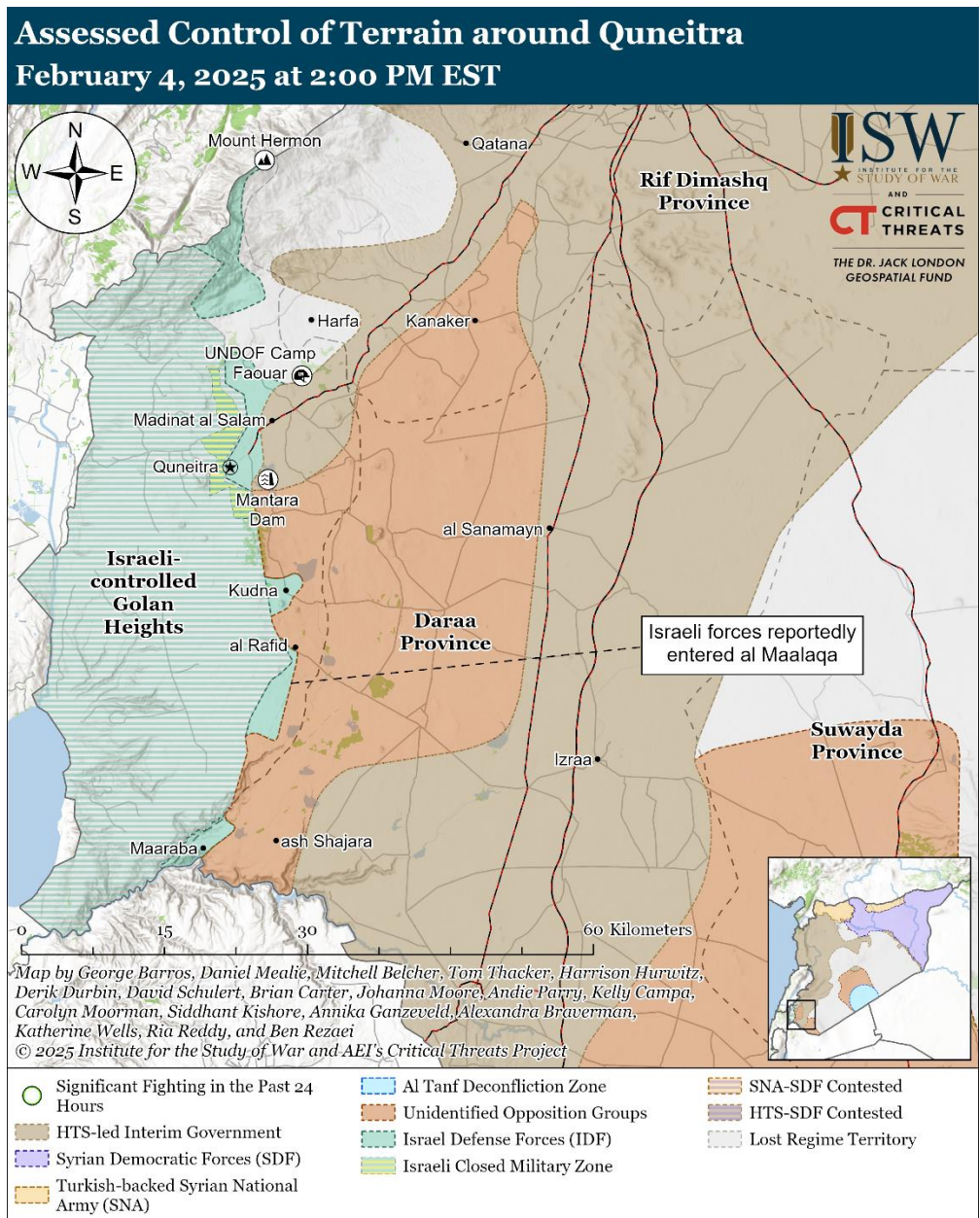


Armed Syrian factions have expressed varying degrees of willingness to integrate into the interim Syrian Defense Ministry. The interim Syrian government announced on January 29 that “all military factions, political, and civil revolutionary bodies will be dissolved and integrated into state institutions.”[55] US-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA) Commander Salem Antari, who controls US-backed “Free Syrian Army” forces in the al Tanf zone, stated on February 3 that the FSA is negotiating with the interim government to integrate into the interim Defense Ministry.[56] Antari added that the FSA is prepared to assume any duties assigned to it by the new Defense Ministry.[57]

The Druze, Suwayda Province-based Men of Dignity Movement expressed support for the interim government’s efforts to build a Syrian state based on the rule of law but did not pledge its support or allegiance to the new interim government. 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.[58] Hajjar added that only those “charged with protecting institutions” or executing “official duties” will be permitted to carry weapons.[59] An unspecified senior Druze official from Suwayda Province claimed that armed groups in the province will not disarm until the interim government establishes a state and constitution based on a decentralized system.[60] The *Wall Street Journal* reported that the Men of Dignity Movement has thus far prevented the entry of HTS-led forces into Suwayda Province.[61]

Israeli forces likely continued operations in southern Syria on February 4. Syrian media reported that a convoy of Israeli military vehicles briefly entered al Maalaqa, Quneitra Province, on February 4.[62] CTP-ISW cannot verify local reporting. Israeli forces remained stationed in several positions within the disengagement zone between Syria and the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights.[63]



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 Iraqi Federal Supreme Court temporarily suspended the implementation of three laws that the Iraqi parliament passed on January 21.[64] The Federal Supreme Court suspended the implementation of the general amnesty, personal status, and property restitution laws in order to determine the “constitutionality of [these] laws [that are] subject to lawsuits.” Some parliamentarians claimed that parliament illegally passed these laws because it voted on the three laws simultaneously rather than separately.[65] The State of Law Coalition, which is led by former Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki, announced on January 23 that it would file a complaint with the Federal Supreme Court to challenge the constitutionality of the January 21 parliamentary session.[66] The Federal Supreme Court is headed by Jassem Mohammad Aboud, who is close to Iranian-backed Badr Organization Secretary General Hadi al Ameri.[67] Ameri has previously expressed opposition to the General Amnesty Law, claiming that it would allow “terrorist organizations” to “circumvent the state’s constitution and escape the grip of justice.”[68] Maliki recently similarly claimed that the General Amnesty Law would release “murderers and criminals” from prison.[69] The General Amnesty Law would grant amnesty to many Iraqis, including some who were arrested under Article 4 of the Anti-Terrorism Law.

The Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) killed five ISIS fighters in airstrikes near Kirkuk, northern Iraq, on January 31.[70] US Central Command (CENTCOM) provided technical support and intelligence to the ISF to conduct the strikes. CENTCOM reported that the fighters had multiple suicide vests and other unspecified materials.

Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) President Nechirvan Barzani met with Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve Commander Major General Kevin Leahy on February 4.[71] Barzani and Leahy discussed the importance of joint cooperation between federal Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan with the US-led international coalition to combat ISIS. Barzani and Leahy also discussed the “unification” of the Peshmerga and the situation in Syria. Barzani formally placed the Peshmerga 3rd and 4th Infantry divisions under the KRG Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs on February 4 as part of the Peshmerga “unification process.”[72]

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

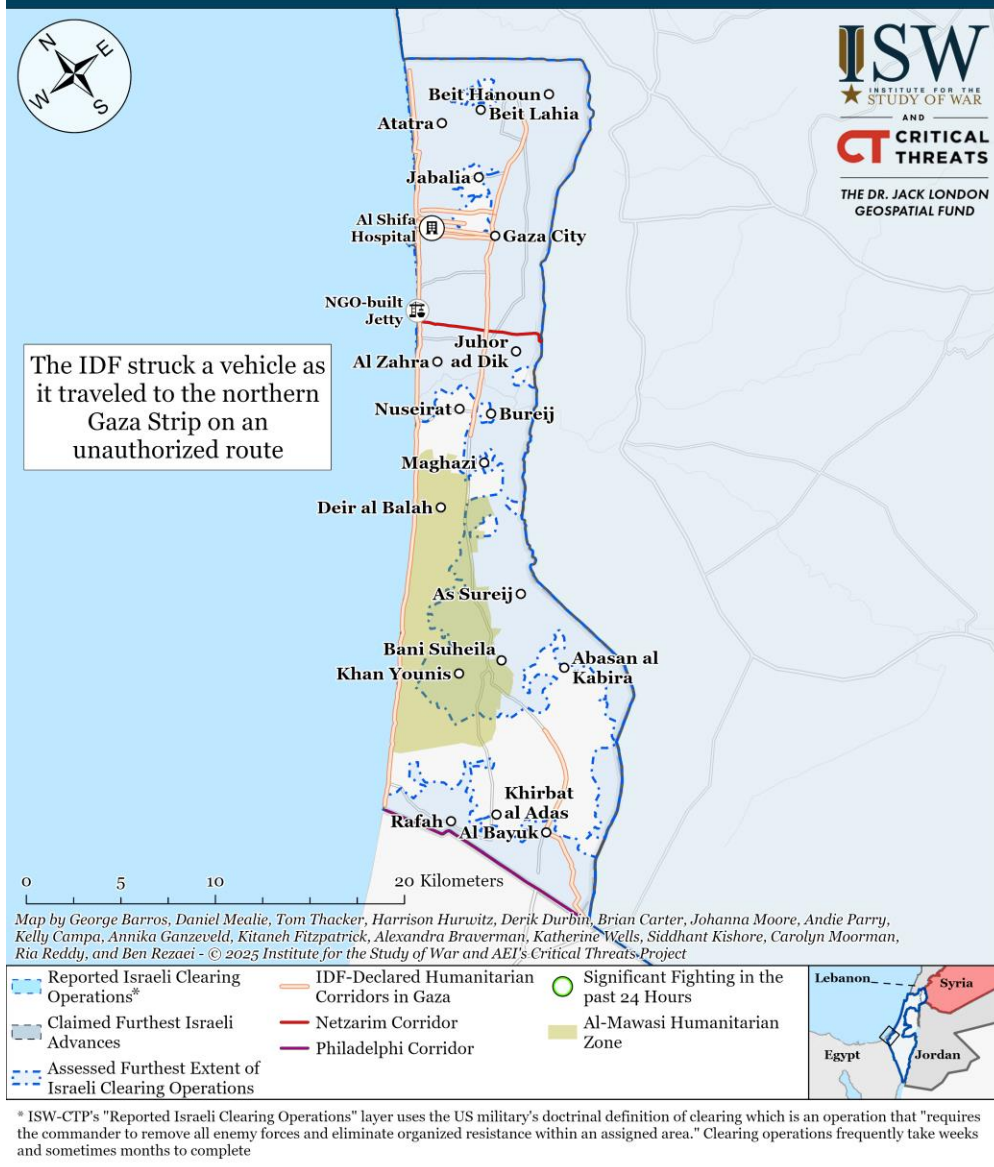
Axis of Resistance objectives:

- 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 Gaza Strip

The IDF Air Force struck a vehicle as it traveled toward the northern Gaza Strip on an unauthorized route on February 4.[73] Palestinian vehicles can only travel to the northern Gaza Strip on the Salah al Din Road after undergoing inspection at the Netzarim Corridor.[74] US and Egyptian private security contractors have operated a checkpoint at the Netzarim Corridor to inspect vehicles since January 27.[75]

Reported Israeli Ground Operations in the Gaza Strip As of February 4, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



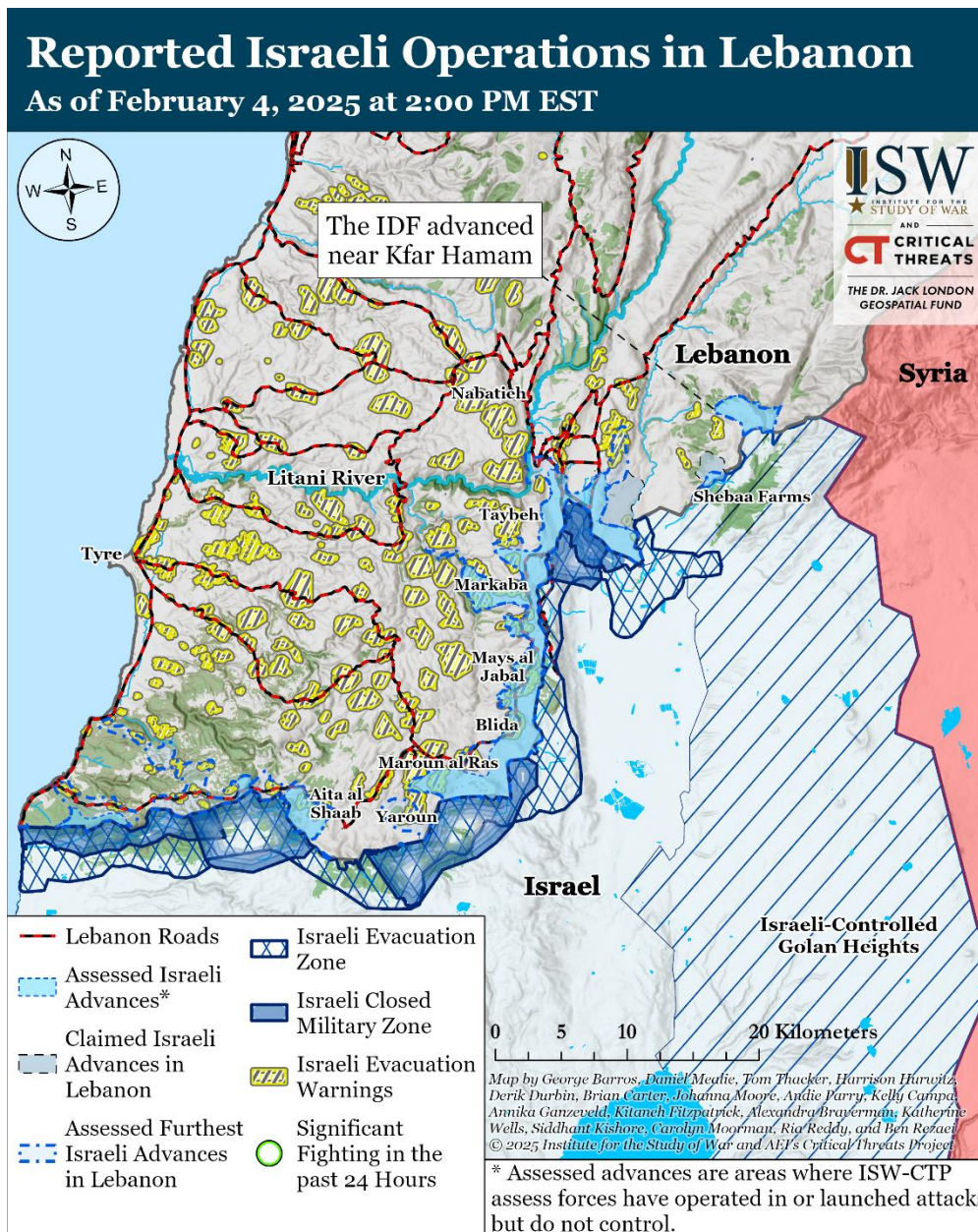
The Palestinian Authority (PA) formed a committee to manage civilian affairs in the Gaza Strip on February 4.[76] The committee includes technocrats and “independent individuals” from the Gaza Strip, according to an unspecified PA official. Hamas and the PA agreed in early December 2024 to form a committee comprised of 10-15 technocrats to manage post-war governance in the Gaza Strip.[77] It is not clear if the PA involved Hamas when PA officials selected the committee.

Egypt is planning to host an international conference in cooperation with the United Nations to discuss reconstruction efforts in the Gaza Strip.[78] Several foreign ministers from Arab countries met in Cairo on February 1 to discuss how to rapidly improve the situation in the Gaza Strip before reconstruction begins.[79] The Israel-Hamas ceasefire-hostage agreement stipulates that Egypt, Qatar, and the United Nations will supervise reconstruction efforts in the Gaza Strip.[80]

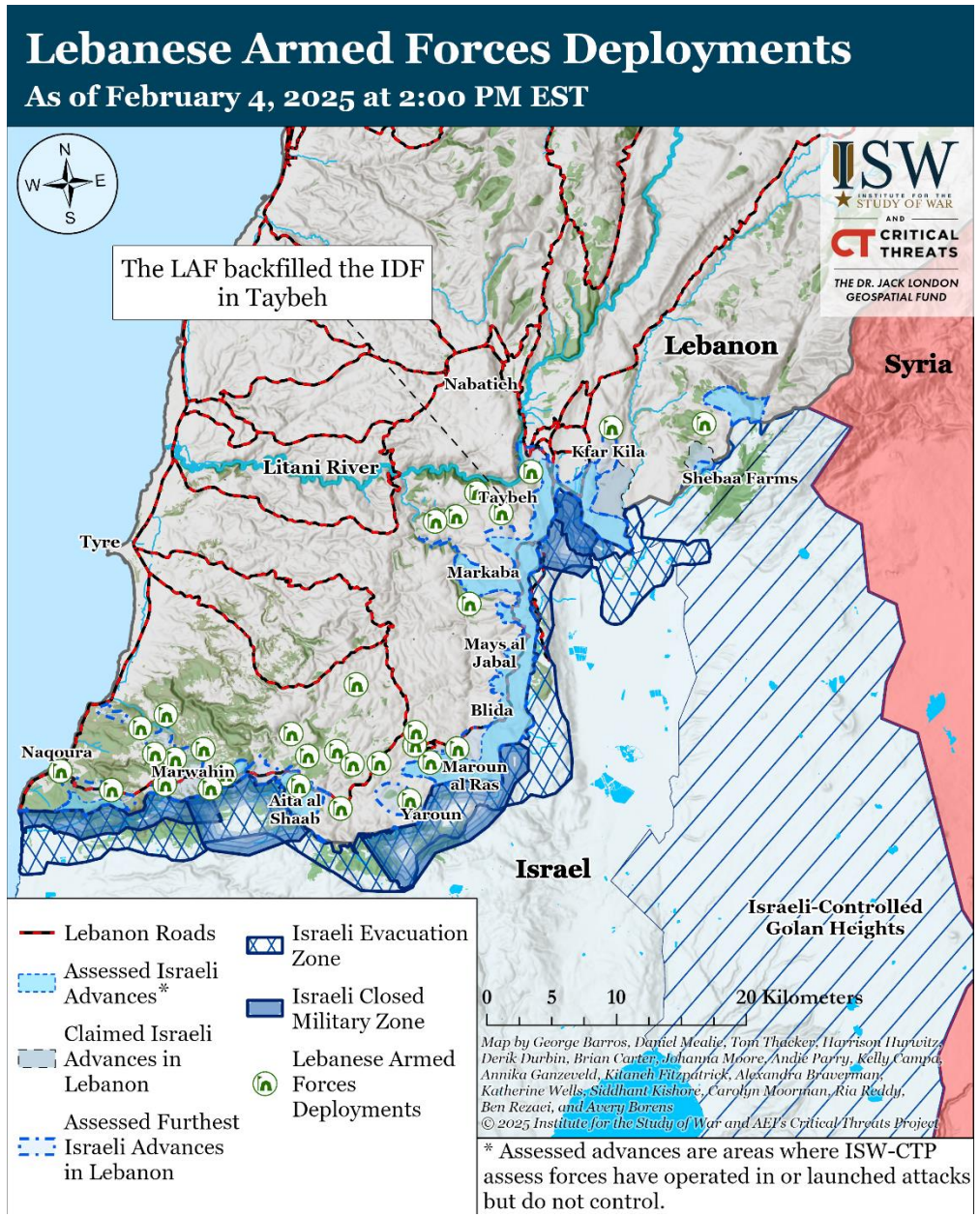
Lebanon

Lebanese media reported that the IDF advanced near Kfar Hamam, southeastern Lebanon, on February 4.[81] Geolocated footage shows that IDF mechanized units advanced southward onto the Kfar Hamam-Kfar Chouba road and later withdrew from the road.[82] The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) reportedly deployed to the area to block the IDF advance.[83] Lebanese media reported that LAF forces entered the outskirts of Kfar Hamam on January 21.[84] The LAF and UNIFIL backfilled IDF positions in Kfar Chouba on January 22.[85]

Lebanese media reported on February 4 that the IDF detonated explosives in Kfar Kila, Odaisseh, Houla, and Blida in Marjaayoun District.[86]



The LAF backfilled IDF positions in Taybeh, southeastern Lebanon, on February 4.[87] Lebanese media reported that the IDF destroyed homes in Taybeh and Rab al Thalatheen, north of Taybeh before LAF forces arrived in the area.[88]



Lebanese media reported on February 4 that the IDF detonated explosives in Yaroun and Aitaroun in Bint Jbeil District.[89] Hezbollah-affiliated media claimed that Israeli forces raided homes and fired small arms in eastern Yaroun.[90] Lebanese state media reported that the IDF detonated homes in Aitaroun on February 4.[91] The LAF backfilled an IDF position in Aitaroun on February 1.[92] The LAF first deployed to Aitaroun on January 11.[93]

West Bank

A Palestinian militia fighter attacked an IDF outpost near the Tayasir checkpoint in the northern West Bank on February 4, killing two IDF soldiers and injuring eight.[94] Israeli forces killed the fighter as he tried to run away.[95] IDF Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Herzl Halevi visited the Tayasir checkpoint and stated that the IDF will expand its counterterrorism operation in the West Bank to new areas.[96] No militia has claimed responsibility for the attack at the time of this writing.

The IDF continued its counterterrorism operation in the West Bank on February 4. The IDF has killed 55 fighters and detained 380 fighters since January 21.[97] Israeli forces have also seized several weapons and improvised explosive devices (IED). The IDF is currently operating in Jenin, Tulkarm, and Tubas governorates in the northern West Bank.

Iranian Decision-Making, Internal Dynamics, and Foreign Policy

A Saudi-owned, London-based outlet reported that Iranian Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Vahid Jalalzadeh traveled to Beirut on February 1 to facilitate the evacuation of Iranians from Damascus to Tehran via Rafic Hariri International Airport.[98] The outlet reported that Iran seeks to repatriate Iranians with Syrian citizenship to Tehran, citing an unspecified security source. The outlet also reported that Jalalzadeh called for international assistance to settle Syrian refugees in Lebanon during meetings with Lebanese Foreign Minister Abdallah Bou Habib and General Security Chief Major General Elias al Bayssari.

Iranian Supreme Leader Adviser Ali Larijani met with Iraqi Parliament Speaker Mahmoud al Mashhadani in Tehran on February 4.[99] Mashhadani presented a proposal to establish a conference for “neighboring Arab and Islamic countries” to support Syria. Larijani stated that “Tehran would be the first country to participate in this conference.”

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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