

Iran Update



Annika Ganzeveld, Johanna Moore, Andie Parry, Ben Rezaei, Katherine Wells, Ria Reddy, Alexandra Braverman, Siddhant Kishore, Carolyn Moorman, Bailey Pasternak, and Brian Carter

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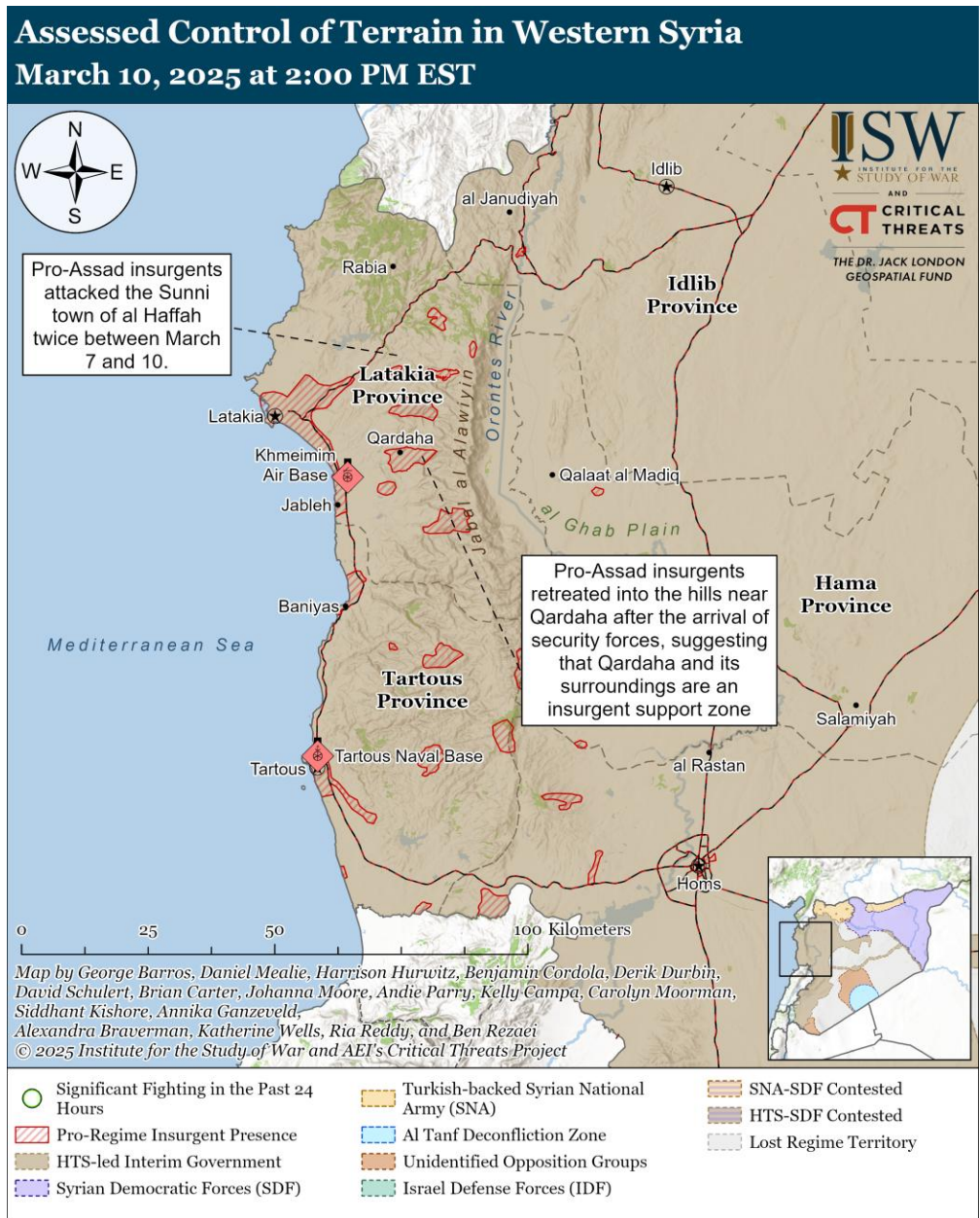
The Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute and the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) publish the Iran Update, which provides insights into Iranian and Iranian-sponsored activities that undermine regional stability and threaten US forces and interests. CTP-ISW publishes the Iran Update every weekday.

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.

Current Syrian interim government counterinsurgency operations are insufficient to defeat pro-Assad insurgent cells across Syria. Interim government forces launched major counterinsurgent operations in former regime strongholds between March 7 and 10.[1] These operations have coincided with a decrease in insurgent activity but insurgent cells have continued attacks on interim government forces while expanding attacks across Tartous Province.[2] The decrease in rate of insurgent attacks during major counterinsurgent operations is more likely due to insurgents withdrawing from an area for the duration of the operation rather than a reflection of the operation's success in destroying cells. There have been few engagements between insurgents and Syrian government forces during these large-scale counterinsurgent operations, suggesting that the insurgents are lying low and avoiding contact. Counterinsurgency operations require that security forces maintain their presence in an area to control it and prevent insurgents from reestablishing their connections with their support base.[3] The interim government announced Syrian forces began to withdraw from western Syria after successfully pushing insurgents out of city centers.[4] Interim government forces established approximately 150 checkpoints to prevent the movement of fighters. Checkpoints alone will not defeat the insurgency, because checkpoints are commonly placed on major thoroughfares and not the sorts of small roads and trails that are known to local fighters and can easily bypass checkpoints. Static checkpoints also do not destroy the insurgent force and usually fail to protect the population.[5]

The interim Syrian government has not addressed outstanding grievances within the Alawite community. Damascus will need to address these grievances to build the stability and confidence in government institutions necessary to defeat the insurgency. A unit within the interim government forces was removed from counterinsurgency operations over the weekend after committing extrajudicial killings but was not appropriately detained and reportedly proceeded to commit additional acts of violence against the civilian population.[6] Interim Syrian

President Ahmed al Shara gave a speech on March 9 in which he briefly acknowledged accusations of extrajudicial killings by HTS-led forces and promised that those who “exceeded the powers of the state” will be held accountable.[7] Shara also appointed two Alawites and several competent, professional judges to a committee to investigate the crimes committed by government troops, which is a notable step towards ameliorating sectarian concerns.[8] Government forces have arrested some of those responsible for extrajudicial killings.[9] Interim government raids targeting former Assad regime members since December 2024 have fueled reports of revenge-based attacks and harassment, particularly against the Alawite community.[10] Failure to hold perpetrators of extrajudicial killings during the recent clearing operations accountable will exacerbate fears within the community that government forces are targeting civilians.



The violence in coastal Syria has prompted calls for sectarian violence in Iraq. A new group called the Ya Ali Popular Formations announced on March 9 that it will “pursue” and “expel” Syrians in Iraq who support “al Jolani’s terrorism against the Alawite people and minorities.”^[11] The group accused the Iraqi federal government of supporting “crimes against humanity” and warned that it will “escalate” attacks if the Iraqi federal government does not confront the Syrian interim government. The Ya Ali Popular Formations has not claimed an attack at the time of this writing.

Iraqi security forces separately arrested two Syrian nationals in Baghdad on March 8 and 9 for promoting sectarianism. Security forces arrested a Syrian man in Um al Kuber wa al Gazlan neighborhood in northeastern Baghdad on March 8 for “promoting extremist content” online.^[12] An unspecified source told Iraqi media on March 10 that Iraqi authorities have “intensified efforts to monitor and dismantle” online networks that promote terrorism.^[13] Security forces also arrested a Syrian man in Zafaraniya neighborhood in southeastern Baghdad on March 9 for “glorifying ISIS and inciting sectarianism” on social media.^[14]

Some Iraqi Shia officials have accused the Syrian interim government and interim government-affiliated forces of fomenting violence and committing acts of sectarian cleansing against Alawites in Syria. Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Asaib Ahl al Haq leader Qais al Khazali accused groups “disguised as security forces” of executing members of the Alawite community.^[15] Khazali called on the international community and “active and inactive countries in the Syrian area” to intervene in the conflict and protect Alawite civilians. Iraqi nationalist Shia cleric Moqtada al Sadr separately accused the Syrian interim government of targeting Alawites “with violent methods that may amount to sectarian cleansing.”^[16] Sadr called on the Syrian interim government to preserve unity in Syria in order to prevent Israel from exploiting the situation to “invade” Syria.

Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei reiterated his rejection of negotiations with the United States. Khamenei rejected negotiations with Western powers during a speech to senior Iranian officials in Tehran on March 8.^[17] Khamenei dismissed talks as a “tool for imposing new restrictions” on Iran’s defense capabilities, missile range, and international partnerships. Khamenei framed Western insistence on negotiations as a “pressure tactic” and emphasized that “Iran will not accept any new demands.” Khamenei’s remarks come after US President Donald Trump sent a letter on March 5 proposing nuclear talks.^[18] Khamenei’s remarks reinforced his speech on February 7, where he categorically rejected nuclear talks and called negotiations with the United States, “unwise, unintelligent, and dishonorable.”^[19] Senior Iranian military officials, including Armed Forces General Staff Chief Major General Mohammad Bagheri, have echoed Khamenei’s rejection of negotiations since his speech on March 8.^[20]

Khamenei also addressed Iran’s economic challenges during his speech and tried to downplay the impact of sanctions.^[21] Khamenei demanded currency system reforms, increased investment in domestic industries, and stronger action against smuggling to stabilize the economy. It is unlikely that any of these policies would outweigh the effects of US sanctions on the Iranian economy or solve the underlying issues that plague the Iranian economy. These issues include corruption, nepotism, and the outsized role of the IRGC and parastatal organizations in the economy. Khamenei warned that Western powers aim to weaken Iran by targeting public livelihoods and claimed that Iran’s adversaries want to make Iran’s economy fail. Khamenei framed economic reforms as essential to resist Western pressure.

Khamenei remarks reflected the regime's concern over economic instability, rising inflation, national currency devaluation, and the impact of renewed US "maximum pressure" sanctions against Iran.[22]

The United States revoked a waiver for Iraq to import Iranian electricity as part of the US "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran.[23] The removal of the waiver will likely threaten political stability in Iraq and damage Iran's economy further. The waiver suspension bars Iraq from directly importing Iranian electricity, but Iraq can still import Iranian gas. The Iraqi state-owned gas company head told Reuters on March 10 that Iraq will sign a new gas import deal with Qatar and Oman at the end of March 2025 to mitigate the effects of a potential US decision to bar Iranian gas exports to Iraq.[24] It is unclear whether Qatari and Omani gas exports to Iraq would be sufficient to compensate for the potential cessation of gas imports from Iran. Iranian electricity exports to Iraq comprised around four percent of Iraq's total electricity consumption in 2023, whereas Iranian gas exports accounted for over 30 percent of Iraq's total gas consumption.[25]

An energy shortage could threaten Iraqi political stability by triggering power outages amid summer heat waves, which could trigger major anti-government protests ahead of Iraq's October 2025 parliamentary elections. Summer power cuts have caused major anti-government demonstrations in Iraq in the past.[26] Temperatures in Baghdad can reach as high as 120 degrees Fahrenheit in the summer. Public frustration about electricity outages could influence the results of the Iraqi parliamentary elections in October 2025 because Iraqi citizens could blame incumbent politicians for the energy shortage, which could advantage independents or help Moqtada al Sadr's Sadrist Movement. The Sadrist Movement is currently not active in national-level parliamentary politics. US National Security Advisor Mike Waltz assured Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al Sudani on March 9 that the United States will collaborate closely with Iraq to minimize any effects the waiver has on Iraqi stability, while stressing that this strategy is designed to isolate Iran.[27] The United States has historically issued sanctions waivers for Iranian electricity exports to Iraq.

The suspension of the waiver will likely further damage the Iranian economy. Iraq has been Iran's second-largest destination for non-oil exports, which have amounted to 11.2 billion USD since last March, according to recent Iranian media reports.[28] The top three non-oil Iranian exports are three different forms of gas. The suspension of the electricity waiver is another measure the United States has taken in its "maximum pressure" campaign, which aims to reduce Iran's energy exports to zero in an effort to force Iran into negotiations regarding the Iranian nuclear program.[29] The United States has already considered implementing an accord that would allow the United States to ask other nations to inspect Iranian oil tankers, in addition to sanctioning individuals, entities, and vessels facilitating Iranian oil trade.[30]

The US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the Syrian interim government agreed to a ceasefire and political agreement on March 10.[31] Syrian Interim President Ahmed al Shara and SDF Commander Mazloum Abdi signed a seven-point document outlining principles of understanding between the two leaders.[32] The ceasefire is notable given that the SDF and factions affiliated with the interim government have ostensibly fought each other in northern Syria since December 2024.[33] The Turkish-backed Syrian National Army, which was brought under the command of the interim defense ministry in January 2025, has launched daily attacks targeting the

SDF along the Euphrates River with Turkish air support.[34] The interim government has not deployed its official military formations to lines of contact with the SDF, but Syrian Interim Defense Minister Marhaf Abu Qasra warned in January that the Syrian interim government was “ready” to use force against the SDF if needed as part of the government effort to integrate the SDF into the new Syrian armed forces.[35]

The March 10 agreement stipulates that the SDF’s military and civil organizations will integrate into the Syrian state, but it is unclear how the integration will occur in practice.

The agreement’s text provides few details on the method of integration beyond that it will bring “all civil and military institutions in northeastern Syria into the administration of the Syrian state.”[36] Damascus had requested in January 2025 that the SDF disintegrate its forces and have its fighters join the Interim Defense Ministry as individuals, not as a military bloc under previous SDF command structures.[37] SDF commander Abdi refused this demand when it was first presented.[38] Abdi also refused pressure to integrate into the Interim Defense Ministry after Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Ocalan’s call to disarm in late February 2025.[39] Ocalan’s call could have influenced Abdi’s decision to sign this agreement, though Abdi had previously said he would not sign an agreement on integration without a ceasefire.

The emerging insurgency in coastal Syria likely influenced the terms that Shara and the SDF were willing to compromise on, leading to a deal.

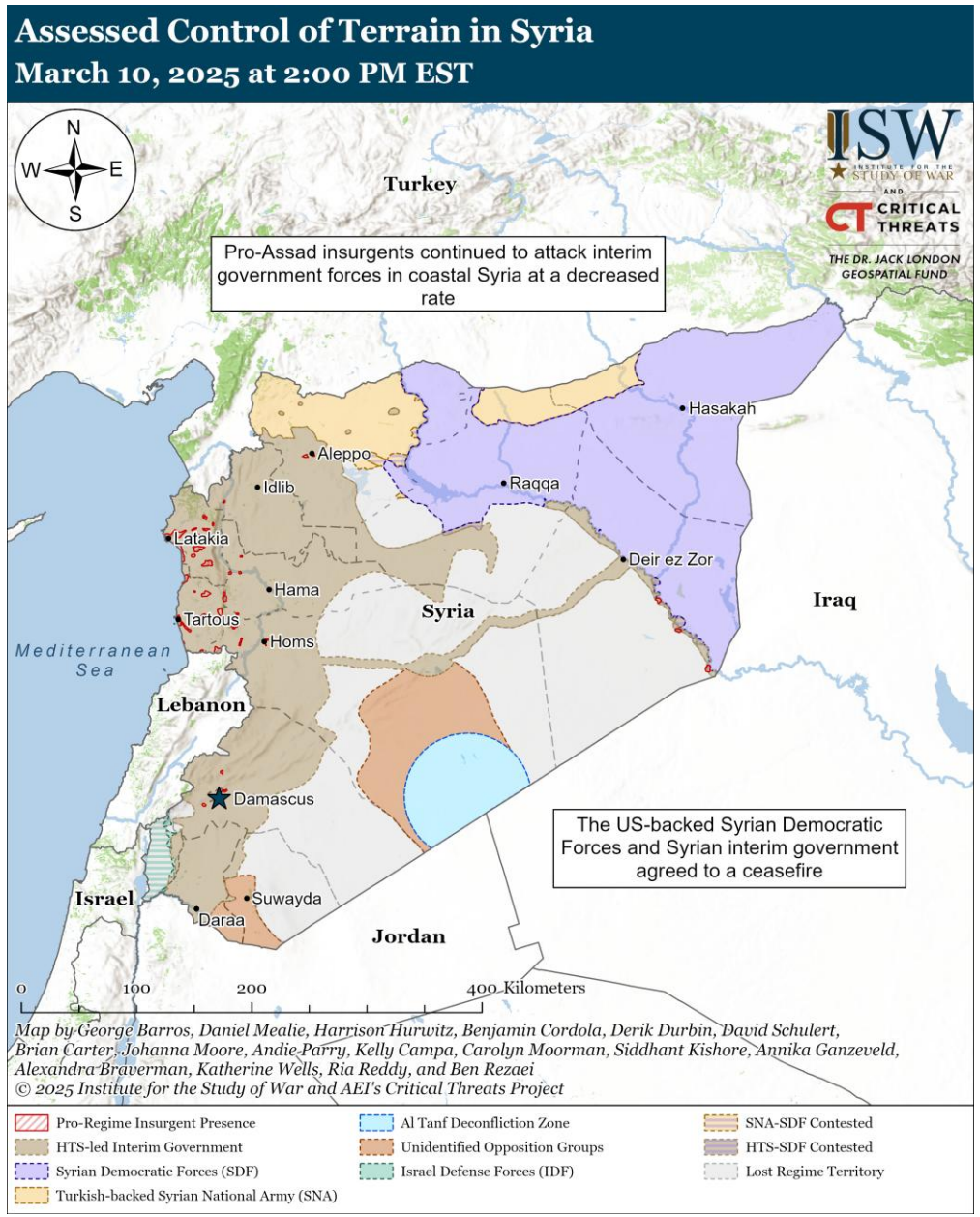
It remains unclear at this time which party conceded their previously held position regarding terms of military integration. Unrest in Latakia and Tartous provinces has drastically decreased the interim government’s bandwidth, however. An interim government deployment to the contact lines with the SDF would require a large number of combat-experienced, well-disciplined forces, which are the exact sort of forces required to conduct counterinsurgency operations against Assadists in western Syria. The SDF agreed to support Damascus in “its fight against the remnants of Assad” and other threats to Syrian security on March 10, suggesting that SDF forces could help alleviate bandwidth concerns by countering former Assadists in Sunni Arab areas along the Euphrates River.[40]

The insurgency and harsh counter-insurgent reprisals from interim government forces likely strengthened SDF leaders’ conviction that the organization must retain some force capable of defending the Kurdish population from ethno-sectarian violence, however.[41] The Syrian interim government had not previously provided guarantees to the SDF that it would protect SDF territory and Syrian Kurds during the integration of the SDF into the interim government. The Abdi-Shara agreement recognized Kurdish rights to Syrian citizenship and ensured the return and protection of all displaced Syrians to their villages, likely in an effort to assuage these Kurdish concerns.[42]

Damascus will take over key physical sites currently controlled by the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria under the agreement.

The SDF gave the interim government control over all border crossings, airports, and petroleum resources in northeastern Syria.[43] Regional media reported that the interim government would also take over the administration of currently SDF-controlled detention facilities holding 10,000 ISIS fighters and displaced persons camps holding around 46,000 ISIS supporters and refugees in northeastern Syria.[44] Neither the SDF nor Damascus have confirmed this report. The interim government’s control over the camps will not solve the repatriation and deradicalization issues, however. Damascus

will probably have similar—if not more—difficulty repatriating the fighters and camp residents because it has less leverage than the United States and many countries around the world have little incentive to repatriate their nationals who joined or supported ISIS.



Hezbollah Secretary General Naim Qassem said on March 9 that Lebanese government efforts to establish a state monopoly on violence do not apply to Hezbollah.^[45] Qassem stated that he did not believe Lebanese President Joseph Aoun’s recent statements that called on the government to establish a state monopoly over weapons are directed at Hezbollah.^[46] Qassem argued that Hezbollah serves as a “necessary” deterrent against Israeli attacks into Lebanon, which is a long-running Hezbollah claim to justify its existence as a non-state militia in Lebanon.^[47] Qassem said that the Lebanese government should pursue reconstruction efforts in southern Lebanon without the conditions that “some are talking about.” Qassem is likely referring to Lebanese parliamentarians who

recently emphasized that international reconstruction aid is contingent on Hezbollah demilitarization.[48] Qassem reiterated that Hezbollah will allow the Lebanese state to pursue diplomatic solutions with Israel as long as it does not “make us lose Lebanon.” This position on diplomatic solutions with Israel is likely deliberately vague to enable Hezbollah to justify military action against Israel if Hezbollah feels military action is necessary, with or without the acquiescence of the Lebanese state. Qassem admitted that the Israel-Lebanon war weakened Hezbollah.

Key Takeaways:

- **Pro-Assad Insurgency:** Current Syrian interim government counterinsurgency operations are insufficient to defeat pro-Assad insurgent cells across Syria. The decrease in the rate of insurgent attacks during major counterinsurgent operations is more likely due to insurgents withdrawing from an area for the duration of the operation rather than a reflection of the operation’s success in destroying cells.
- **Syrian Government Response to Insurgency:** The interim Syrian government has not addressed outstanding grievances within the Alawite community. Damascus will need to address these grievances to build the stability and confidence in government institutions necessary to defeat the insurgency. The government did appoint two Alawites and several competent, professional judges to investigate crimes in the coastal areas. It has also arrested some of those responsible for extrajudicial killings.
- **Iranian Nuclear Negotiations:** Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei reiterated his rejection of negotiations with the United States. Khamenei also addressed Iran’s economic challenges during his speech and tried to downplay the impact of sanctions. It is unlikely that new Iranian policies would outweigh the effects of US sanctions on the Iranian economy or solve the underlying issues that plague the Iranian economy.
- **Energy Waivers in Iraq:** The United States revoked a waiver for Iraq to import Iranian electricity as part of the US "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran. The removal of the waiver will likely threaten political stability in Iraq and damage Iran’s economy further.
- **Damascus-Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) Agreement:** The US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the Syrian interim government agreed to a ceasefire and political agreement on March 10. The March 10 agreement stipulates that the SDF’s military and civil organizations will integrate into the Syrian state, but it is unclear how the integration will occur in practice.
- **Hezbollah:** Hezbollah Secretary General Naim Qassem said on March 9 that Lebanese government efforts to establish a state monopoly on violence do not apply to Hezbollah. Qassem argued that Hezbollah serves as a “necessary” deterrent against Israeli attacks into Lebanon, which is a long-running Hezbollah claim to justify its own existence as a non-state militia in Lebanon.

Syria

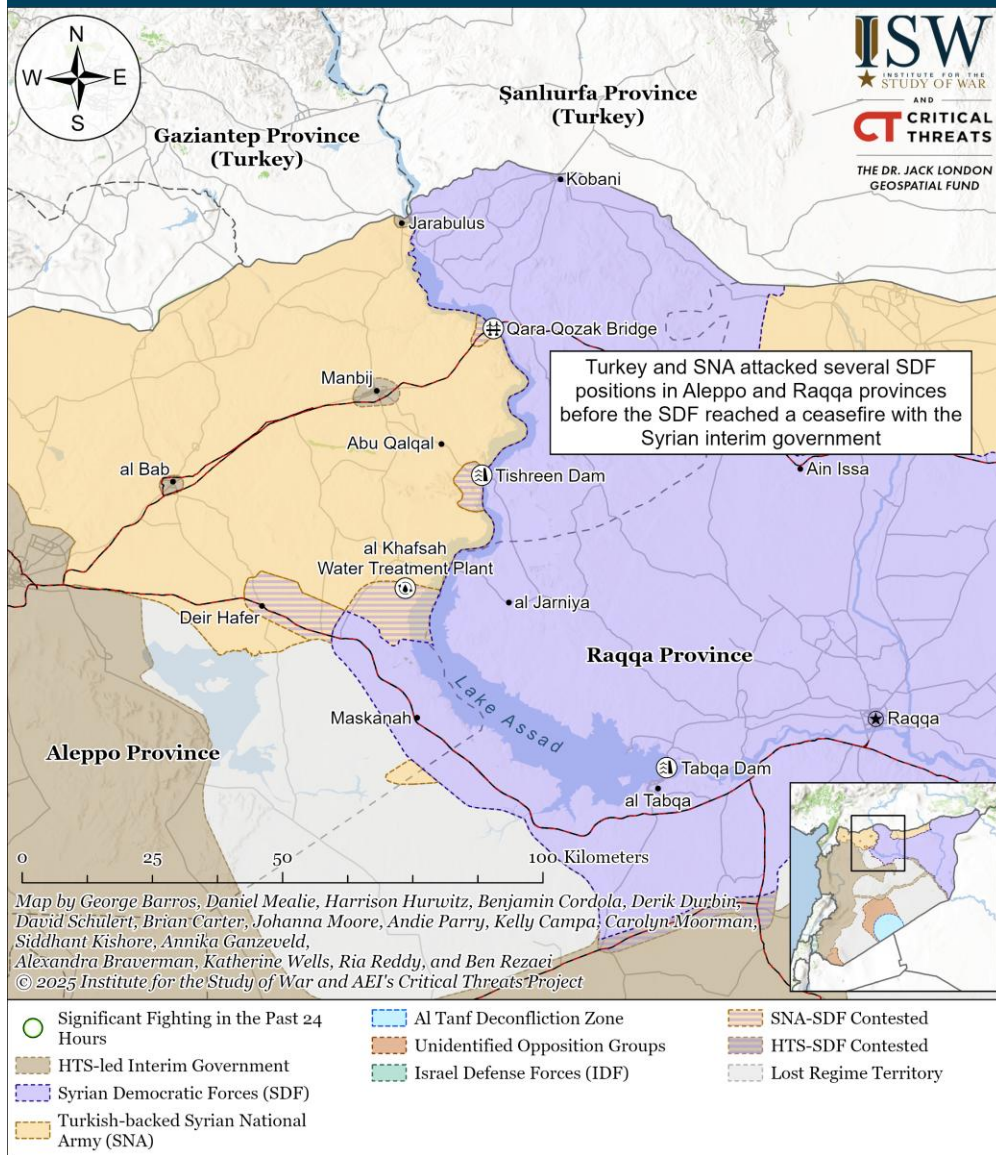
CTP-ISW recorded the below kinetic activities before the SDF and the Syrian interim government agreed to a ceasefire on March 10.

Turkey and the SNA have continued to attack US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) positions in Aleppo and Raqqa provinces since March 7. Turkey conducted several airstrikes targeting SDF positions near Tishreen Dam between March 8 and 10.[49] Turkish aircraft separately struck SDF positions in Sarrin, southeast of Qara Qozak Bridge in eastern Aleppo on March 7.[50] SNA artillery also shelled SDF positions along the Peace Spring frontlines in Raqqa Province.[51] The SNA repelled an SDF attack along the Tishreen Dam frontline, killing and wounding several SDF fighters and arresting one on March 8.[52] SNA artillery separately shelled SDF positions near Tishreen Dam and Qara Qozak Bridge on March 10.[53] The SDF signed an agreement with the interim government in Damascus that included an unspecified "ceasefire" at roughly 2000 local time (see topline section for more information).

Anti-SDF media reported SDF-SNA engagements in Deir Hafer, eastern Aleppo, on March 9 and 10.[54]

Assessed Control of Terrain around Manbij

March 10, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



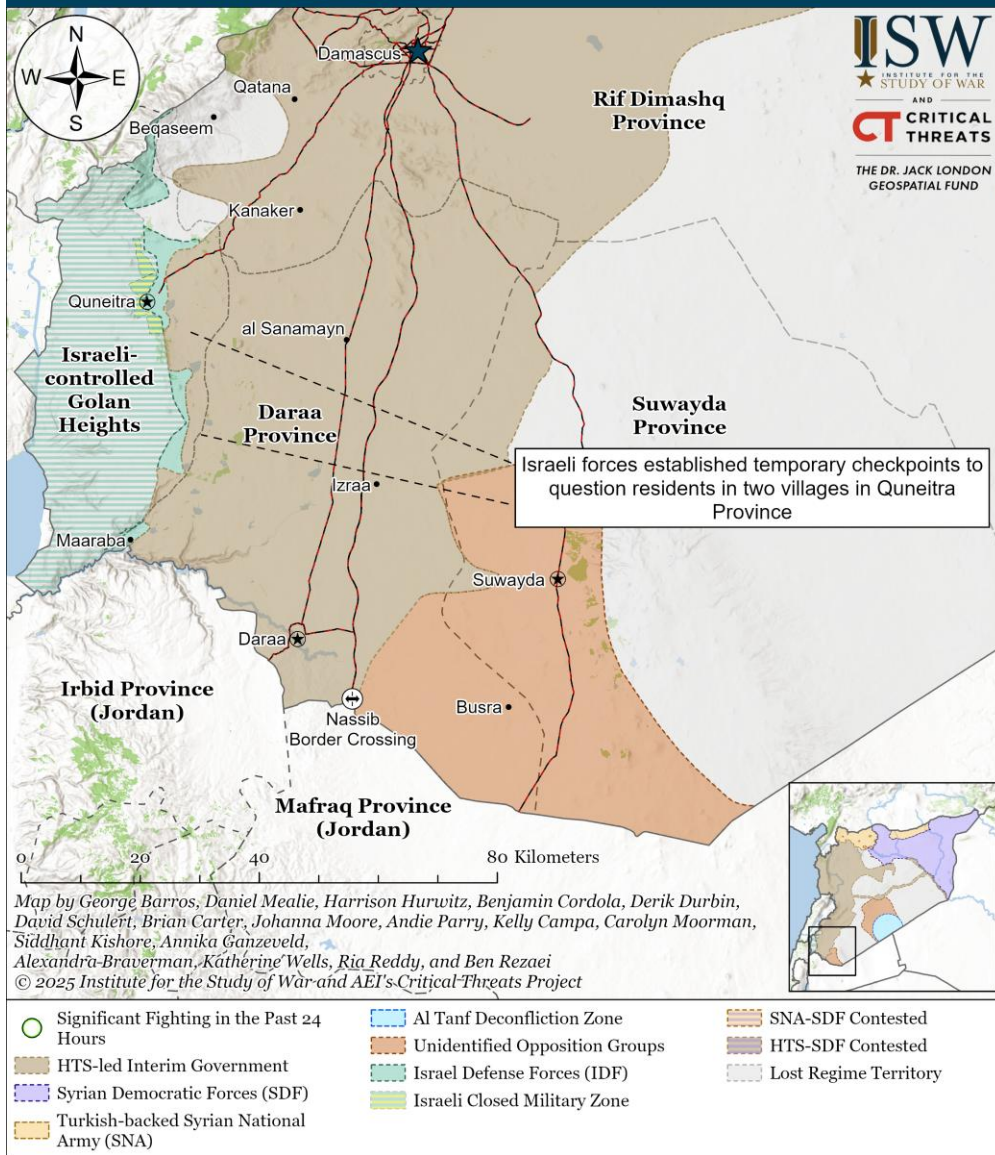
The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) has continued to operate in Daraa and Quneitra provinces in southern Syria since March 7. The IDF reportedly searched houses in Jamlah, Daraa Province, on March 8 and 9.^[55] Syrian media reported that the IDF demolished a former Syrian Arab Army (SAA) position in the village of Rasm al Halabi, Quneitra Province, on March 9.^[56] A southern Syria-based journalist reported on March 9 that the IDF established a temporary checkpoint in Majdoulia, Quneitra Province, to question the residents.^[57] Israeli forces also questioned the residents of al Muallaqa Village in Quneitra Province on March 10, according to a local journalist.^[58] Al Muallaqa residents reportedly rejected Israeli forces' offer of aid and demanded the IDF's withdrawal from the village.^[59]

The IDF Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Eyal Zamir met with senior IDF commanders in the UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) zone.^[60] The IDF Northern Command Commander Major General Ori Gordin and the IDF 210th Division Commander Brigadier General Yair Falai accompanied Zamir during the tour. The IDF 210th Division is currently in the UNDOF zone.^[61]

Unidentified actors attempted to assassinate Druze militia leader Sheikh Suleiman Baqi in Suwayda on March 8.^[62] Ahrar Jabal al Arab Gathering leader Sheikh Suleiman Baqi and other Druze militia leaders agreed to establish Suwaydawi-led security forces under interim Syrian government control on March 6.^[63]

Assessed Control of Terrain in Southwestern Syria

March 10, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



The Swiss Federal Council lifted select energy, financial, and transportation sanctions on Syria on March 9.[64] Switzerland also placed additional sanctions on Bashar al Assad and his associates.[65]

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

See topline section.

Arabian Peninsula

Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Harden the Houthi regime against internal dissent in Houthi-controlled areas
- Destroy the anti-Houthi opposition 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

See topline section.

Iranian Decision-Making, Internal Dynamics, and Foreign Policy

Iranian security forces arrested two nine-person likely Jaish al Adl cells in an unspecified location in southern Sistan and Baluchistan Province on March 8.[66] The IRGC Ground Forces' Quds Operational Base stated that it seized "significant amounts" of weapons and ammunition. Jaish al Adl is a Salafi-jihadi Balochi armed group in southeastern Iran that has been behind an uptick in anti-regime militancy in southeastern Iran since December 2023.

Jaish al Adl announced on March 9 that it killed the Sib and Suran County deputy police intelligence chief in Sib and Suran County, Sistan and Baluchistan Province.[67] Iranian media reported that the Sib and Suran deputy intelligence chief survived an assassination attempt on March 9.[68]

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.



- [1] https://x.com/Daraa24_24/status/1898326871307092069 ;
<https://x.com/QalaatAlMudiq/status/1898328606603952350> ; https://t.me/mzmgr_syria/26931 ;
<https://t.me/SyrianArabNewsAgency/124570> ; <https://t.me/HalabTodayTV/120691> ;
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<https://x.com/GregoryPWaters/status/1898839126075720186>
- [2] <https://x.com/QalaatAlMudiq/status/1898107147709284754> ;
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<https://x.com/QalaatAlMudiq/status/1899053752394363270>
- [3] <https://irp.fas.org/doddir/army/fm3-24.pdf>
- [4] <https://x.com/SanaAjel/status/1899029317222293736>
- [5] <https://x.com/QalaatAlMudiq/status/1899155209890283686> ; <https://t.me/nahermedia/45592>
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[11] <https://x.com/SOHEB2019/status/1898801700833476918>

[12] <https://shafaq dot com/en/Iraq/Iraq-arrests-Syrians-Cracks-down-on-pro-terror-social-media-accounts> ;

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[14] <https://shafaq dot com/en/Iraq/Syrian-national-arrested-in-Baghdad-for-promoting-ISIS-online>

[15] <https://shafaq dot com/ar/%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AE%D8%B2%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D8%B7%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%AF%D8%AE%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%88%D9%8A%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7>

[16] <https://shafaq dot com/ar/%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%8A%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%AF-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%83%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%88%D9%8A%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7>

[17] <https://farsi.khamenei dot ir/speech-content?id=59631>

[18] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-march-7-2025>

[19] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-february-7-2025>

[20] <https://defapress dot ir/fa/news/731792> ;

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<https://www.entekhab dot ir/fa/news/854920/>

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- [23] <https://www.reuters.com/world/trump-administration-ends-iraqs-waiver-buy-iranian-electricity-2025-03-09/>
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