

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. 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.

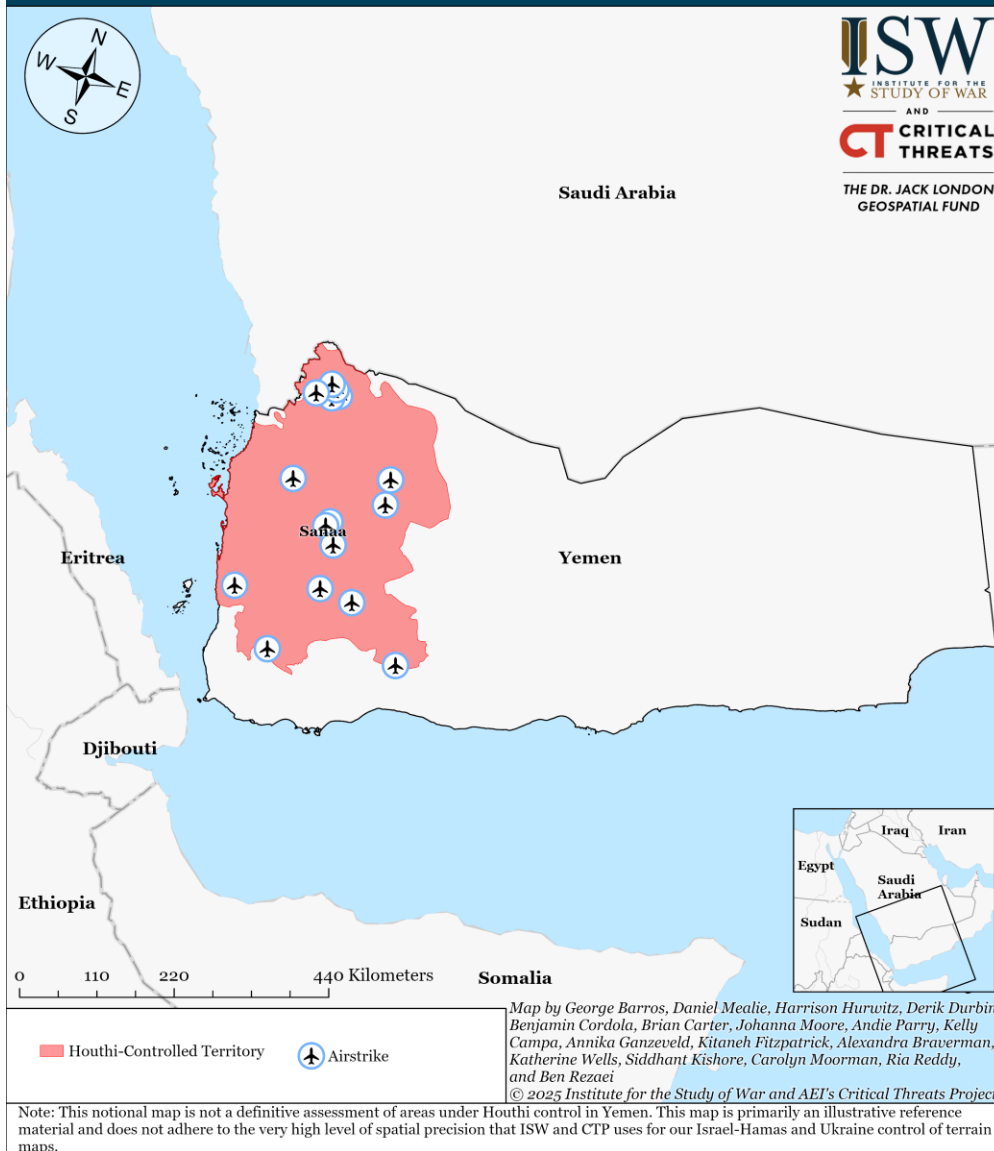
We do not report in detail on war crimes because these activities are well-covered in Western media and do not directly affect the military operations we are assessing and forecasting. We utterly condemn violations of the laws of armed conflict and the Geneva Conventions and crimes against humanity even though we do not describe them in these reports.

US Central Command (CENTCOM) has conducted a series of airstrikes targeting Houthi leaders and infrastructure in Yemen since March 15.^[1] The strikes are in response to the Houthi attack campaign on international shipping, which the Houthis launched in October 2023 in support of Hamas.^[2] The Houthis have conducted 174 attacks targeting US military vessels and 145 attacks targeting commercial vessels since October 2023.^[3] CENTCOM reportedly conducted around 50 strikes across 9 Yemeni provinces, according to Yemeni journalists.^[4] The recent US strikes differ from previous US strikes against the Houthis under former President Joe Biden given that the recent strikes directly targeted Houthi leadership. US National Security Adviser Michael Waltz stated that the strikes killed “multiple” Houthi leaders.^[5] The strikes killed senior Houthi leader Hassan Sharaf al Din and Houthi Supreme Leader Abdulmalik al Houthi’s bodyguard, according to Yemeni sources.^[6]

The strikes also targeted Houthi missile launchers, radars, air defense systems, and drone launch points.^[7] The Houthis use radars to target vessels.^[8] CENTCOM previously destroyed seven Houthi radars in June 2024 after the Houthis sunk a Greek-owned vessel.^[9]

US Strikes Against Houthi Targets

As of March 17, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



The Houthis will likely respond by increasing their rate of attacks targeting US naval and commercial vessels in the Red Sea. Houthi spokesperson Brigadier General Yahya Sarea stated on March 16 that the Houthis will respond “to escalation with escalation.”[10] The Houthis claimed on March 16 that they conducted two missile and drone attacks targeting the USS *Harry S. Truman* aircraft carrier in the northern Red Sea in response to the US strikes.[11] An unspecified US official told ABC News that “none of [the missiles and drones] came close” to hitting the USS *Harry S. Truman*.[12] Unspecified US officials told the *New York Times* on March 15 that CENTCOM could continue to conduct strikes for several weeks and “intensify” the scope and scale of the strikes depending on the Houthis’ response.[13]

Senior Iranian military officials have tried to distance Iran from the Houthi attack campaign against international shipping in the aftermath of the US strikes. Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Commander Major General Hossein Salami claimed on March 16 that Iran does not determine the “national or operational policies” of its proxies.[14] Iran has provided the Houthis with intelligence to identify Israeli-owned vessels in the Red Sea and has helped the Houthis develop their drone and missile stockpiles in recent years.[15] US President Donald Trump stated on March 17 that the United States will hold Iran responsible for any future Houthi attacks.[16]

Iran appears unwilling to make concessions on its missile program, likely because it regards this program as Iran’s main deterrent against US and Israeli threats, particularly after the April and October 2024 Israeli airstrikes on Iran. Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei stated on March 8 that Western powers are trying to use nuclear negotiations to “set new expectations” for Iran’s missile range.[17] Khamenei emphasized that Iran “will not accept or comply” with such demands. Senior Advisor to the Armed Forces General Staff Brigadier General Hossein Ashtari echoed Khamenei’s remarks and stated on March 15 that Iran “will definitely not accept” new “expectations” for the ranges of its missiles.[18] Iranian Strategic Foreign Relations Council Chairman Kamal Kharazi previously stated in November 2024 that Iran may increase its missile range.[19] Iran’s explicit unwillingness to limit its missile program suggests that Iranian leadership perceives that Iran’s missile program is Iran’s primary deterrent against US and Israeli threats. This is particularly true after IDF airstrikes on Iran in October 2024 disrupted Iran’s ability to produce solid-propellant ballistic missiles and neutralized Iran’s most advanced air defense assets.[20] Iranian leaders likely recognize that Iran is increasingly vulnerable and may prioritize their missile program to establish deterrence against US and Israeli threats. Iran unveiled their latest precision-guided ballistic missile called the “Etemad” in February 2025.[21] The missile has a range of 1,700 kilometers. Iranian armed forces-run Defa Press published a piece on March 16 on the “Etemad” missile, referring to it as the “Israeli ballistic missile” that can reportedly hit key targets across Israel.[22] Iranian media is emphasizing that the “Etemad” missile can hit Israeli cities likely to try to shape Israeli decision-making and deter a potential Israeli strike on Iran.

Iran and its partners are likely attempting to rebuild its smuggling networks along the Syria-Lebanon Border. Hezbollah-affiliated smugglers have continued to resist Syrian government efforts to prevent smuggling along the Syria-Lebanon border. Likely Hezbollah-linked Lebanese smugglers engaged Syrian forces on March 16 near Qusayr, on the Syria-Lebanon border. The smugglers kidnapped and killed three Syrian soldiers.[23] Hezbollah “categorically denied” any involvement in the clashes on the Syria-Lebanon border, but the smugglers in the Qusayr area almost certainly cooperate with Hezbollah given that the Qusayr area is part of a long-time supply corridor from Iran to Hezbollah through Syria.[24] Likely Hezbollah-affiliated smugglers previously clashed with Syrian border security forces during a counter-smuggling operation near Qusayr in February 2025.[25] Iran almost certainly seeks to re-establish its overland smuggling network through Syria and rebuild its influence in the territory by promoting insurgent movements.

Pro-Assad insurgent elements are likely coordinating with the Hezbollah-affiliated smuggling network along the border. The Syrian Popular Resistance, a pro-Assad insurgent group operating in Syria, conducted attacks in January 2025 in western Homs Province near the Lebanon-Syria border related to smuggling networks.[26] These attacks occurred during fighting

between the Syrian government and Lebanese fighters. The Syrian Popular Resistance also announced its support on March 16 for what it said were “Lebanese tribes” engaged in clashes with Syrian forces.[27] The overlapping activity in the border area suggests a degree of cooperation at a minimum between the Hezbollah-linked smugglers and the pro-Assad Alawite insurgent fighters.[28] Interim government crackdowns on these smuggling networks could exacerbate grievances in coastal Syria by removing income sources for some community members. Successful counter-smuggling and counterinsurgent operations against smugglers and pro-Assad insurgents will remain critical to preventing Iran from expanding a foothold in Syria, however.

Prolonged clashes on the northeastern Lebanese border may inhibit the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) ability to prevent Hezbollah reconstitution in southern Lebanon. The LAF deployed to the Lebanese side of the border and “responded to sources of fire” after Syrian forces shelled Lebanese border villages on March 17.[29] The LAF could experience bandwidth constraints should it have to engage in multiple areas of Lebanon as Hezbollah is attempting to reconstitute its military capabilities in southern Lebanon.[30]

Diverse Syrian groups rejected the draft constitution that Syrian President Ahmed al Shara adopted on March 13. Druze spiritual leader Sheikh Hikmat al Hijri condemned the new constitution on March 15, calling it “illogical.”[31] Hijri has been at odds with other Druze leaders in recent weeks over the integration of Suwayda into the Syrian interim government.[32] Suwaydawi lawyers also criticized the new constitution for its lack of safeguards against Shara’s pursuit of authoritarian policies.[33] CTP-ISW noted on March 13 that Shara could use some of the articles in the constitution to consolidate his personal power over the Syrian state.[34] Druze and Suwaydawi views of the constitution could impact ongoing governance and military integration agreements. 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.[35] Kurdish groups similarly continued to condemn the new constitution after the Kurdish-majority Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) and Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) rejected the constitution on March 13 and 14 for obstructing a democratic transition and prioritizing Arab identity.[36] Hardline Islamist and jihadist factions also denounced the new constitution and argued that key clauses were “un-Islamic.”[37] It is unclear at this time if these factions are part of Shara’s original support base. Some hardline jihadist factions have likely formed splinter groups in opposition to the interim government in response to Shara’s moderate policies.[38]

A new Iraqi group called the “Abbas Shield Martyrdom Forces” announced on March 15 that it would protect Iraq and its religious beliefs.[39] The group called on Iraqi and Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) members to join.[40] It claimed on March 17 that 40,000 people have submitted membership applications.[41] Iraqi media reported that the group’s leader, Karar Fatah al Subihawi, has previously attended PMF events and was connected to the former leader of Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Jaysh al Mukhtar, Wathiq al Battat.[42] Battat was a senior official in Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Kataib Hezbollah before he formed Jaysh al Mukhtar in 2013.[43] Subihawi reportedly remained in Damascus, Syria, after the collapse of the Assad regime to “liberate” the Sayyidah Zeinab shrine from the Syrian interim government.[44] Subihawi’s return to Iraq and the formation of the Abbas Shield Martyrdom Forces may reflect concerns among some hardline pro-

Iranian Iraqi politicians and militia figures about the Syrian interim government. Multiple Iranian-backed Iraqi Shia political figures see the Syrian interim government and its leader, Ahmed al Shara, as “terrorists.”[45] This new group could seek to directly stoke sectarian tensions in Iraq. The newly formed Ya Ali Popular Formations announced on March 11 that it has begun to pursue Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) members and supporters in Baghdad.[46] CTP-ISW assessed on March 12 that the risk of sectarian violence from Syria spilling into Iraq is increasing due, in part, to the Ya Ali Popular Formations.[47]

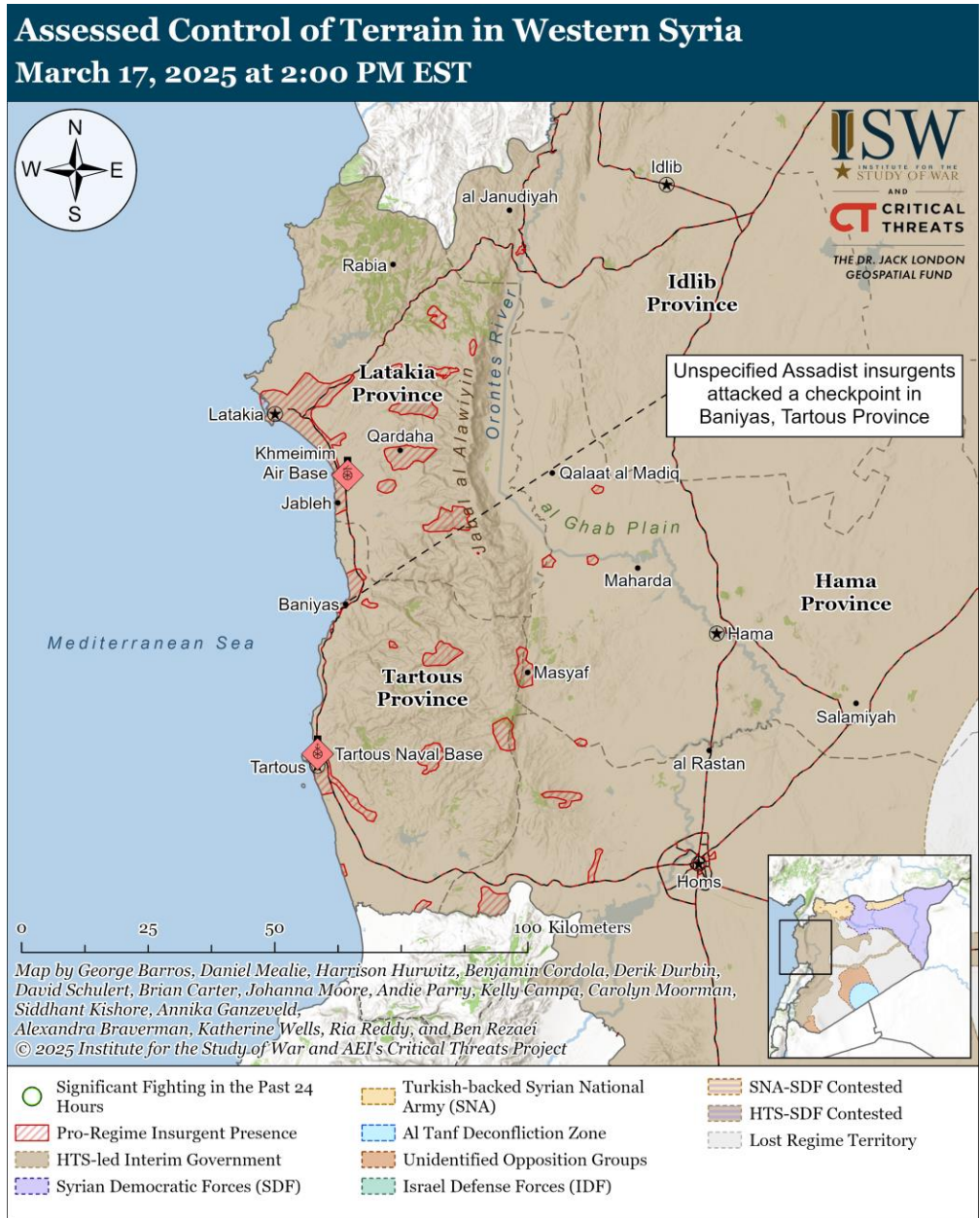
Key Takeaways:

- **US Airstrikes in Yemen:** US Central Command (CENTCOM) has conducted a series of airstrikes targeting Houthi leaders and infrastructure in Yemen since March 15. The recent US strikes differ from previous US strikes against the Houthis under former President Joe Biden given that the recent strikes directly targeted Houthi leadership. The strikes reportedly killed at least one senior Houthi official and the head of security for Houthi supreme leader Abdulmalik al Houthi.
- **Iranian Negotiations:** Iran appears unwilling to make concessions on its missile program, likely because it regards this program as Iran’s main deterrent against US and Israeli threats, particularly after the April and October 2024 Israeli airstrikes on Iran.
- **Syrian Insurgency and Smuggling:** Iran and its partners are likely attempting to rebuild its smuggling networks along the Syria-Lebanon Border. Hezbollah-affiliated smugglers have continued to resist Syrian government efforts to prevent smuggling along the Syria-Lebanon border. Pro-Assad insurgent elements are likely coordinating with the Hezbollah-affiliated smuggling network along the border.
- **Syrian Constitution:** Kurdish and Suwaydawi Syrian groups rejected the draft constitution that Syrian President Ahmed al Shara adopted on March 13.
- **Iraqi Militias:** A new Iraqi group called the “Abbas Shield Martyrdom Forces” announced on March 15 that it would protect Iraq and its religious beliefs.

Syria

Assadist insurgents continued to sporadically attack interim government forces amid government efforts to restore order after an uptick in ethno-sectarian violence from March 5-7. Unspecified Assadist insurgents attacked a checkpoint in Baniyas, Tartous Province on March 15.[48] The interim government established approximately 150 checkpoints to prevent the movement of fighters and maintain security after withdrawing most of its external forces from the Syrian coast.[49] Checkpoints are commonly established on major roads and not on small roads and trails that local fighters may be aware of and can use to bypass checkpoints. Static checkpoints also do not destroy an insurgent force and usually fail to protect civilian populations. The Syrian Popular Resistance separately claimed to ambush local interim government police in Talfita, northwestern Rif Dimashq Province, on March 14.[50] Local sources reported the ambush wounded two security officers.[51] The Syrian Popular Resistance stated on March 14 that government forces did not detain the fighters responsible.[52] The Syrian Popular Resistance 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. These attacks come as several coastal towns surrendered their weapons to the interim government as part of a process of "settling" with the government.[53] Interim government security forces also continued to detain insurgents reportedly involved in attacks during the March 5-7 sectarian violence.[54]



A delegation from the interim Syrian government will meet with Kurdish political representatives from northern and eastern Syria starting March 19 to discuss integration into the interim government.[55] Interim Syrian government President Ahmed al Shara and Syrian Democratic Forces commander Mazloun Abdi signed a document on March 10 stipulating that the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) civil and military organizations will integrate into the Syrian state.[56] The agreement established a set of guiding principles but did not

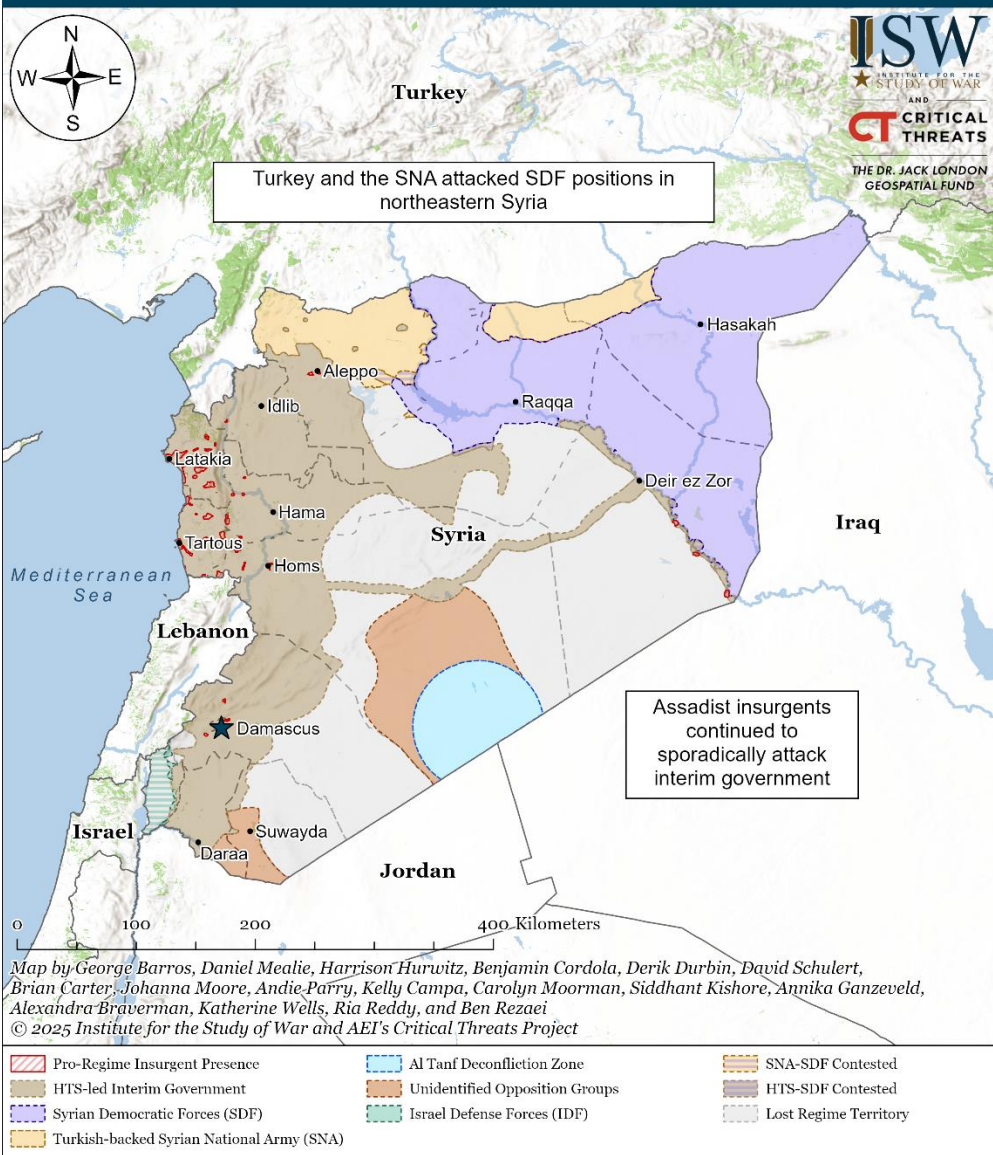
identify the means of integration or level of autonomy the AANES will retain. Upcoming discussions will create working groups to negotiate parameters for the AANES economic, political, and military integration into the interim government.[57] The interim Syrian government is expected to meet separately with an Arab delegation from the AANES in Damascus.[58]

Turkey and the interim Syrian government have begun reconstruction efforts on Menagh Airbase, Aleppo Province as of March 17. Menagh Airbase is expected to host Turkish air defense systems and fighter jets when renovations are complete.[59] The base will also serve as a hub for Turkish and Syrian joint military operations and exercises.[60] Turkish construction of this base may hamper negotiations between the Kurdish parties and the interim Syrian government as Turkey continues airstrikes on SDF positions in Syria.[61] The SDF is primarily comprised of Kurdish armed factions with some Arab components. These armed groups may refuse to disarm or condition their disarmament on a stop to all Turkish airstrikes.

Interim Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad al Shaibani attended the 9th Brussels Donor Conference on Syria and secured aid and sanction relief from several European countries.[62] Shaibani met his counterparts from several European countries on the sidelines of the conference on March 17.[63] Belgian Foreign Minister Hadja Lahbib announced plans to “gradually ease” sanctions on Syria to support reconstruction and stability.[64] EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Kaja Kallas pledged over 720 million euros to assist Syrians.[65] Germany and Switzerland separately committed 300 million euros and 73 million euros in aid, respectively.[66]

Assessed Control of Terrain in Syria

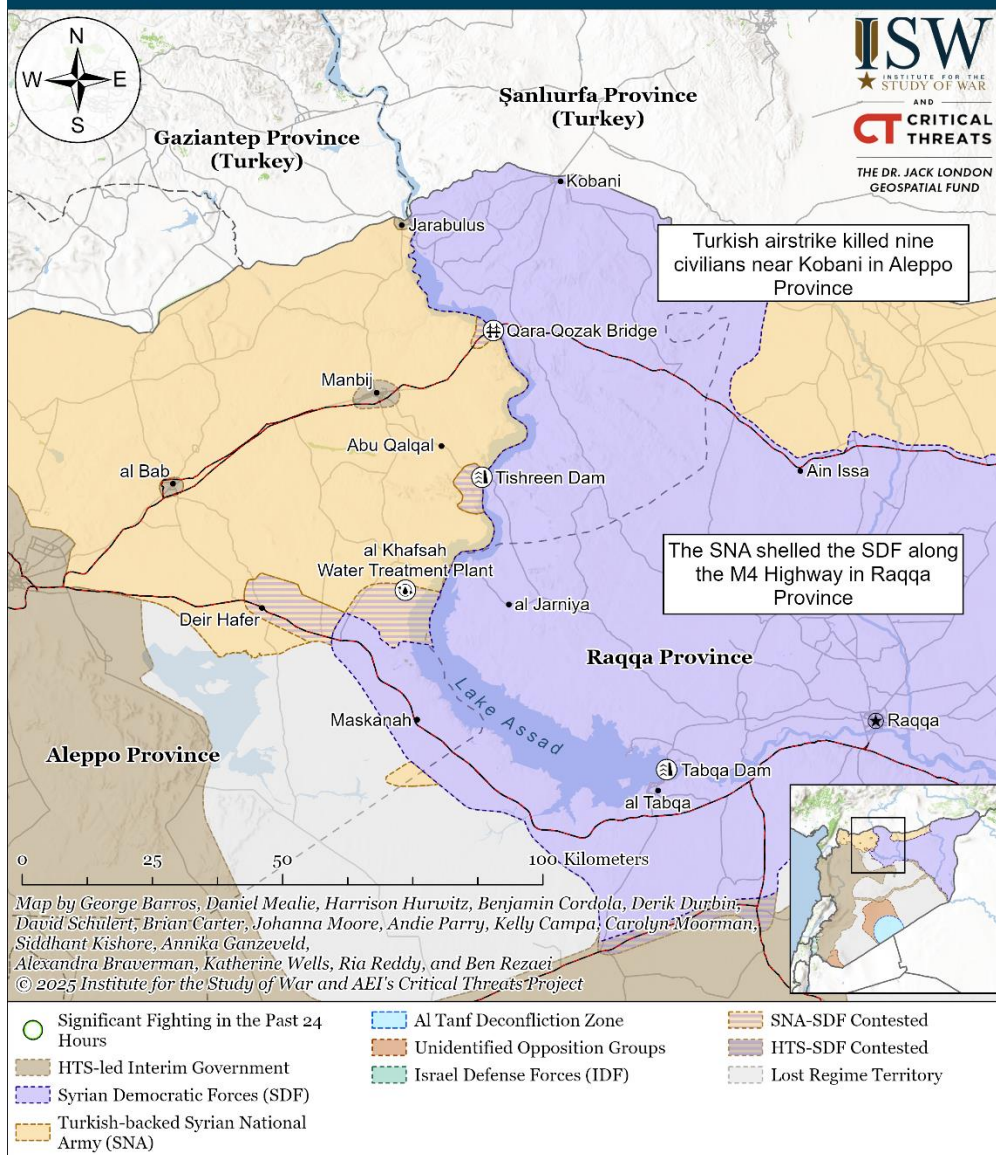
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Turkey and the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) have continued to attack US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) positions in northeastern Syria since March 14. Turkish aircraft struck the SDF near Tishreen Dam on March 15.[67] Turkish aircraft separately struck SDF positions around Qara Qozak Bridge in eastern Aleppo Province on March 15 and 16.[68] The SDF claimed that a Turkish airstrike killed nine civilians near Kobani in Aleppo Province on March 16.[69] The SNA shelled the SDF along the M4 highway in northern Raqqa Province on March 14.[70] The SNA separately shelled SDF positions in Hasakah Province on March 15 and 16.[71]

Assessed Control of Terrain around Manbij

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The interim Defense Ministry continued recruiting security forces in Daraa Province in southern Syria on March 17.[72] Syrian media reported that around 1000 Syrians registered to join the security forces in al Masmiyah, eastern Daraa Province, on March 17.[73] The interim Defense Ministry has established several recruitment centers across Daraa Province to recruit soldiers into the 40th Division of the new Syrian army.[74] Syrian interim government began recruiting soldiers in Daraa and Suwayda provinces in southern Syria last week.[75] These recruitments are part of the interim government's recent efforts to gain some degree of control in southern Syria, a region where the HTS-led interim government lacks control.

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

US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth reportedly encouraged the Iraqi federal government to expedite the disarmament and dismantlement of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias during a phone call with Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al Sudani on March 16.[76] Iraqi media reported that Sudani confirmed the Iraqi federal government’s efforts to address the issue with the militias. This phone call comes amid reports that the United States threatened to sanction PMF leaders.[77] CTP-ISW assessed on March 12 that the Iraqi federal government may be trying to prevent US sanctions by integrating the PMF into the Iraqi security establishment under current legislation in Parliament.[78]

US CENTCOM and the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) struck and killed the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) Chief of Global Operations and the Delegated Committee Emir, Abdullah Makki Muslih al Rifai, in Anbar Province on March 13.[79] Rifai served as the head of ISIS’s senior decision-making body. He managed operations, logistics, and planning for ISIS globally and directed a large portion of the group’s finances. The strike also killed another ISIS fighter.

Arabian Peninsula

Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Harden the Houthi regime against internal dissent in Houthi-controlled areas
- Destroy the anti-Houthi opposition in order to control all of Yemen
- Erode Israeli will to continue the war in the Gaza Strip

See topline section.

The Palestinian Territories and Lebanon

Axis of Resistance objectives:

- Erode the will of the Israeli political establishment and public to sustain clearing operations in the Gaza Strip
- Reestablish Hamas as the governing authority in the Gaza Strip
- Rebuild and reestablish Hezbollah in southern Lebanon
- Establish the West Bank as a viable front against Israel

See topline section.

Iranian Decision-Making, Internal Dynamics, and Foreign Policy

Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister for Legal and International Affairs Kazem Gharibabadi met with International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director Raphael Grossi in Vienna on March 17 to discuss Iran-IAEA cooperation and nuclear negotiations.[80] This meeting

comes after Gharibabadi met with his Russian and Chinese counterparts in Beijing on March 14 and issued a joint statement effectively condemning the US "maximum pressure" strategy vis-a-vis Iran.[81]

Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Commander Major General Hossein Salami appointed a new regional IRGC commander in northwestern Iran on March 15, which may signal the regime's emphasis on security threats in the area.[82] Salami appointed Brigadier General Amanullah Gashtasbi as Hamzeh Seyyed ol Shohada Operational Base commander. The Hamzeh Seyyed ol Shohada Operational Base, headquartered in Oroumiyeh, West Azarbaijan Province, is one of the IRGC's ten regional commands responsible for counterinsurgency and border security in West Azarbaijan and Kurdistan Provinces.[83] Gashtasbi replaced Brigadier General Ali Akbar Pour Jamshidian, who had held the position from June 2023 to March 2025.[84]

Gashtasbi's prior commands reflect his experience in counterinsurgency, border security, and special operations. Gashtasbi commanded multiple units that operated in areas that would have given Gashtasbi significant experience in these areas. He commanded the Saber Special Forces Brigades, which conducts counterterrorism missions and protects strategic sites inside and outside Iran, from 2013 to 2014.[85] He later commanded the 110th Salman Farsi Independent Special Forces Brigade from 2018 to 2020, which is responsible for Iran's southeastern borders and conducts specialized military operations in Sistan and Baluchistan Province.[86] Finally, he commanded the Beyt ol Moghaddas Unit from 2023 to 2025. This unit focuses on security in Kurdistan Province, counters anti-regime groups, and maintains border security.[87]

Likely Jaish al Adl fighters attacked an IRGC vehicle and killed one IRGC member on the Khash-Zahedan Road in Sistan and Baluchistan Province on March 16.[88] The IRGC Ground Forces' Quds Operational Base stated that efforts to identify the attackers are underway. Jaish al Adl is a Balochi Salafi-Jihadi militant group that attacks Iranian security forces in southeastern Iran.[89] CTP-ISW has observed an uptick in anti-regime militancy in southeastern Iran since December 2023.

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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