

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.

A senior official from Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba implicitly warned on March 20 that Iranian-backed Iraqi militias would resume attacks targeting US forces in Iraq and Syria if US forces do not withdraw from Iraq by the end of 2025.^[1] The official suggested that Iranian-backed Iraqi militias would conduct “advanced and modern strikes” targeting US forces if US forces do not withdraw from Iraq by this date. The United States and Iraq agreed in September 2024 that hundreds of US-led international coalition forces would withdraw from Iraq by September 2025 and that remaining forces would withdraw by the end of 2026.^[2] The Iraqi federal government has reportedly considered postponing the withdrawal of US forces in recent months due to the security threat it perceives that the fall of the Assad regime in Syria poses to Iraq, however.^[3] The removal of US forces from Iraq and Syria is a long-standing Iranian objective and Iranian-backed Iraqi militias frequently conducted attacks targeting US forces in Iraq and Syria between October 2023 and January 2024.^[4] Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba previously resisted Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani’s order to halt attacks targeting US forces in early January 2024.^[5] Ghaani recently met with Iranian-backed Iraqi militia leaders in Baghdad on March 19 and may have discussed efforts to remove US forces from Iraq with these leaders.^[6]

Iranian-backed Iraqi militias and the Houthis are increasingly sharing military knowledge, which could increase both groups’ ability to threaten US and allied interests in the region. The Houthis have extensive experience in drone warfare and have shared this experience with Iranian-backed Iraqi militias, as evidenced by the death of a Houthi drone expert in a

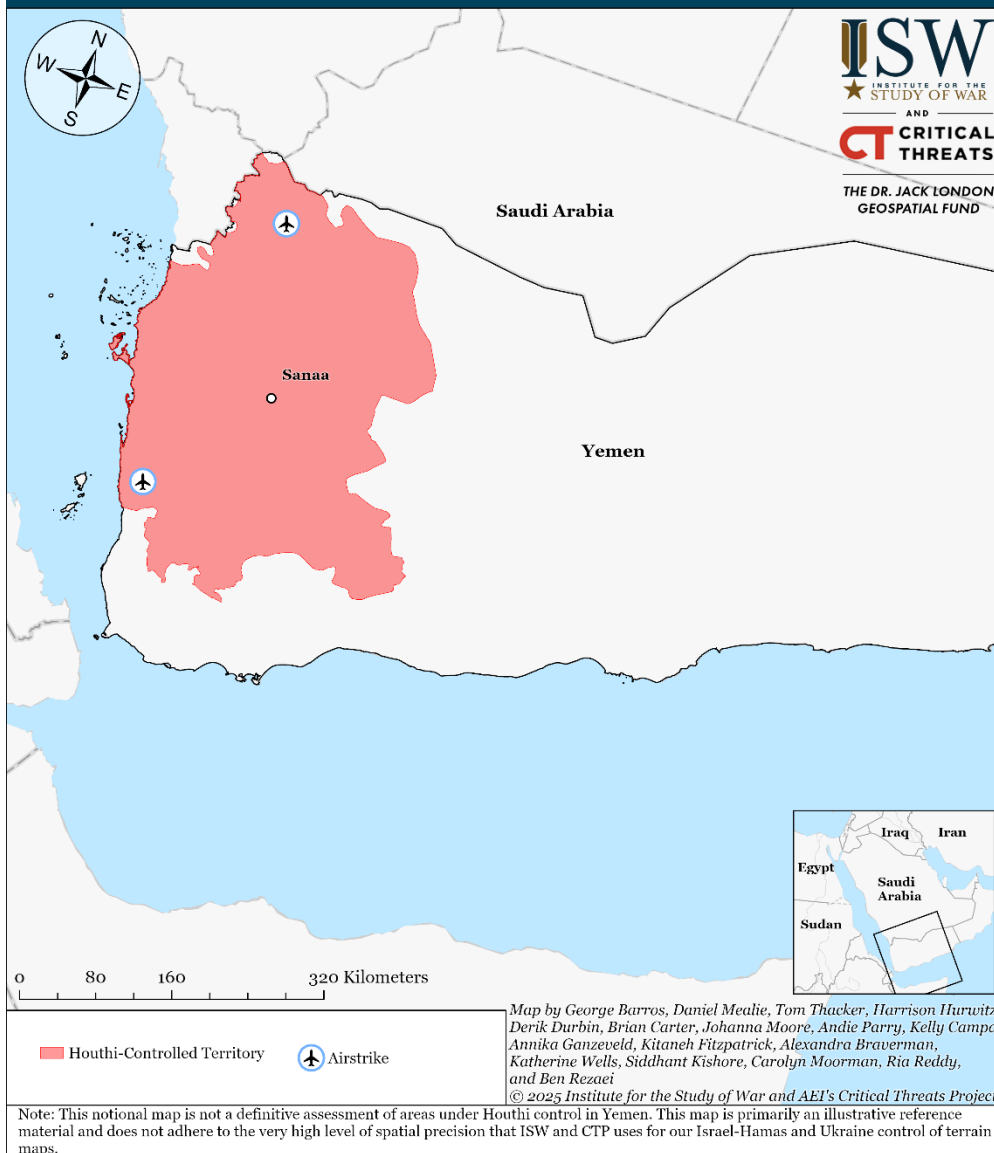
US airstrike south of Baghdad in July 2024.[7] The Houthis also reportedly operate three offices across Iraq and a training camp in a town controlled by Kataib Hezbollah in Diyala Province, according to the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI).[8] RUSI reported on March 19 that Iranian-backed fighters in the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) have reportedly deployed to Yemen in recent months to train Houthi fighters in combat technology, including drones and improvised explosive devices.[9]The presence of Iranian-backed Iraqi fighters in Yemen and Houthi members in Iraq highlights that knowledge transfers between the Houthis and Iraqi militias are reciprocal.

US President Donald Trump announced on March 19 that the United States will partner with regional allies “to dismantle Houthi operations and secure the Red Sea.”[10] These allies almost certainly include Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) given that Saudi and Emirati-backed proxy forces in Yemen would be best suited to threaten Houthi control in Yemen. It is unclear what Trump means by “dismantle.” Defeating the Houthis and ending their operations would probably require the US and its partners to support the Yemeni government to threaten Houthi control of Yemen.

US Central Command (CENTCOM) has conducted at least six airstrikes targeting Houthi infrastructure in Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on March 19.[11] CENTCOM targeted a cotton mill in Zabid, Hudaydah Governorate, which local media reported the Houthis had converted into a mines and explosive devices factory.[12] The Houthis claimed that 16 Houthis fighters have died in the recent CENTCOM strikes.[13] The Houthis launched an unspecified number of ballistic and cruise missiles and drones targeting the USS *Harry S. Truman* and US destroyers in the Red Sea on March 19 in response to the CENTCOM strikes.[14]

US Strikes Against Houthi Targets

As of March 20, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



The Houthis separately launched two ballistic missiles targeting Ben Gurion Airport in central Israel on March 19.[15] The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) intercepted a Houthi missile before it entered Israeli airspace.[16] The Houthis previously targeted the IDF Nevatim Air Base in central Israel with two ballistic missiles on March 18.[17] The IDF intercepted both missiles.[18] The United States reportedly asked Israel not to respond to these attacks and to "let [the United States] deal with it," according to Israeli media.

Houthi Prime Minister Ahmed Ghaleb Nasser al Rahwi separately met with former Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi in Sanaa, Yemen, on March 20.[19] A Kurdish journalist suggested that Mahdi may have relayed a message from the United States urging the Houthis to stop their attacks on international shipping in the Red Sea.[20] Mahdi previously served as a member of the

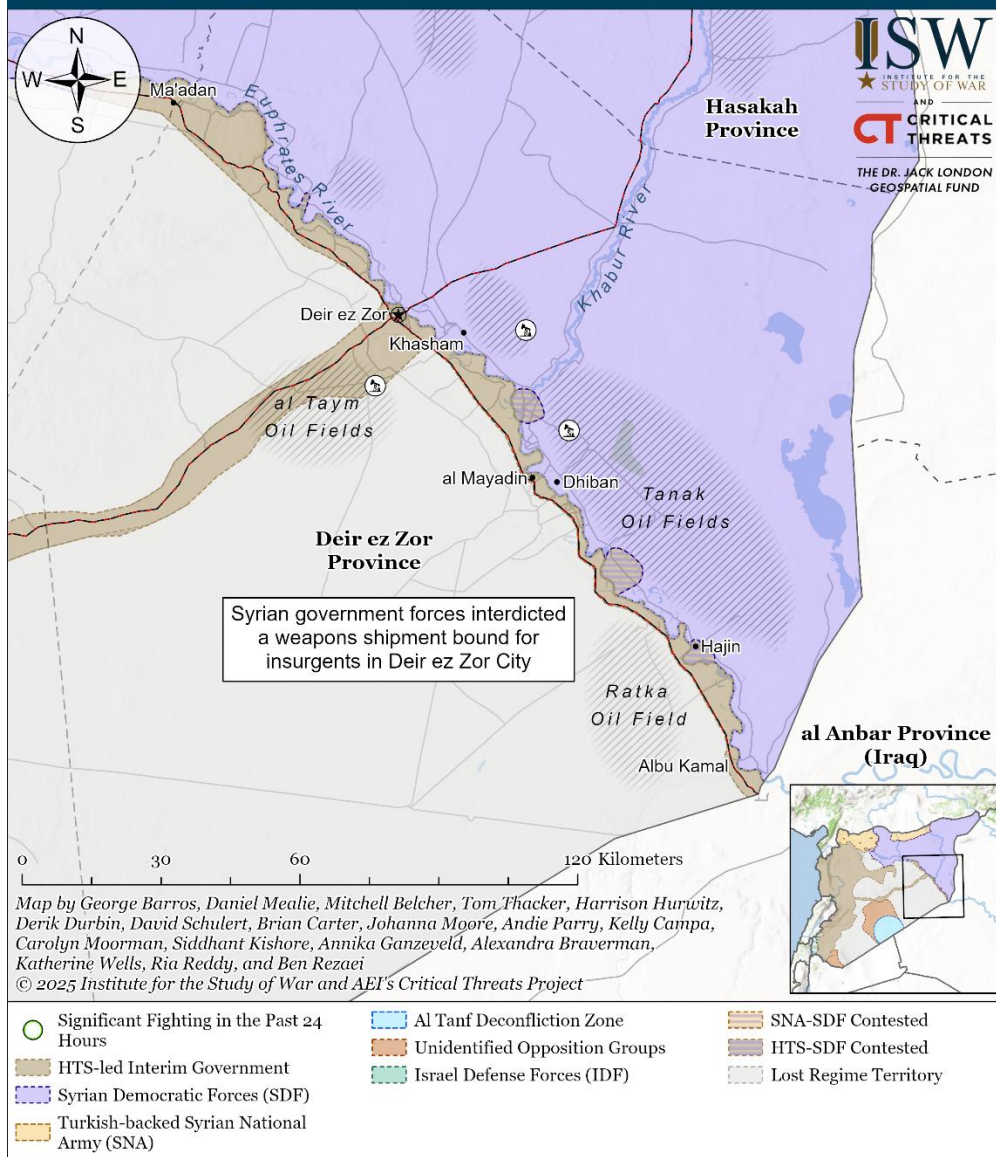
Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), which was founded by former Iranian Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini.[21] Mahdi resigned as prime minister following the outbreak of large-scale protests in Iraq in October 2019.

Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei highlighted Iran's economic weaknesses and problems in his Nowruz speech on March 20.[22] Khamenei announced "Investment for Production" as Iran's new year's slogan, which is consistent with Khamenei's economic-focused new year's slogans in recent years. Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian separately emphasized the issues of inflation and rising costs in his Nowruz speech on March 20.[23] Khamenei's recent rejection of nuclear negotiations with the United States, which would potentially provide Iran with sanctions relief, will likely contribute to worsening Iranian economic conditions. The Iranian regime will also likely not be able to meaningfully improve the Iranian economy if it does not address underlying issues, such as rampant corruption, nepotism, and mismanagement, that currently plague the economy.[24] The value of the Iranian rial has depreciated around 103 percent over the past two years, highlighting how Iranian officials have either lacked the capability or willingness to meaningfully address Iran's economic problems.[25]

Syrian government forces have conducted a series of raids and arrests targeting insurgent networks in Deir ez Zor Province, northeastern Syria, since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on March 19. Syrian government forces interdicted a weapons shipment on March 19 that was bound for insurgents in Deir ez Zor City.[26] Syrian forces also arrested the former IRGC Sayyida Zainab Shrine militia commander in Mayadeen on March 20.[27] Deir ez Zor City's proximity to the Abu Kamal border crossing with Iraq and its location on a primary transportation route made it a key distribution point for weapons smuggling under the Assad regime. Various Assad- and Iranian-backed groups developed human networks and physical infrastructure in the area that emerging insurgent cells could exploit.

Insurgent cells in northeastern Syria may be driven by different underlying motivations than cells in western Syria. Insurgent cells based in Alawite-majority areas in western Syria appear motivated by an interest to restore Assad-era power structures to address economic grievances and security concerns. The insurgents in these areas very likely seek to improve their personal welfare and security rather than reinstate the Assad regime.[28] Anti-interim government attacks in northeastern Syria have occurred in towns along the primary smuggling route from Iraq into Syria on the southern bank of the Euphrates River.[29] These towns were heavily dominated by Iranian and Iranian-backed armed factions and smugglers during Assad's rule. Anti-smuggling crackdowns remove sources of revenue and rents, which in turn increases anti-government sentiment.

Assessed Control of Terrain around Deir ez Zor March 20, 2025 at 2:00 PM EST



A Syrian journalist reported that the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) will withdraw from Deir ez Zor and Raqqa provinces and form an SDF-affiliated army division in Hasakah Province. The SDF met with a Syrian interim government delegation to discuss the terms of the SDF’s integration into the Syrian state at al Shaddadi base, Hasakah Province, on March 19.[30] An eastern Syria-focused journalist, citing unspecified sources and leaks from the meeting, claimed on March 20 that the integration agreement requires the SDF to “completely” withdraw from Raqqa and Deir ez Zor provinces.[31] The journalist added that the government will establish three divisions in northeastern Syria and an “SDF-affiliated” division in Hasakah Province.[32] CTP-ISW cannot verify this report, but it is unlikely that the SDF would agree to withdraw from Raqqa and Deir ez Zor provinces and integrate into the Syrian army while under active attack from Turkey and the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA). An “SDF-affiliated” division

would be consistent with SDF Commander Mazloum Abdi's demand that the SDF maintain some degree of autonomy by joining the Defense Ministry as a "military bloc," however.[33] Syrian interim government officials have repeatedly rejected Abdi's demand, but Syrian Interim President Ahmed al Shara's recent decision to allow Suwaydawi-led security forces to oversee security in Suwayda Province suggests that Shara could be willing to allow the formation of an SDF-affiliated or SDF-led unit in northeastern Syria.[34]

The journalist also claimed that Hasakah Province will be "jointly administered." It is unclear if a "joint administration" refers to the presence of an SDF-affiliated division in Hasakah Province or a decentralized system of governance that would afford the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) some local autonomy.[35] Abdi reportedly requested that the integration process last three years, but the interim government reportedly insists that the SDF's integration take place within one year.[36] Abdi likely seeks a longer integration timeline in order to assess the progress of the transition period and the trajectory of Shara's government, given that the Syrian Democratic Council and the AANES recently publicly rejected the new government's transitional constitution.[37] The transition period is scheduled to last around five years.[38]

Russia aims to increase cooperation with the Syrian interim government, likely to secure military basing rights in Syria. Russian President Vladimir Putin sent a letter to Syrian Interim President Ahmed al Shara on March 20 in which he expressed Russia's willingness to develop "practical cooperation" with the Syrian interim government on "all issues on the agenda." [39] These issues almost certainly include economic cooperation. Russia has established some degree of economic cooperation with Syria since February 2025. Russia has delivered local Syrian currency and shipped crude oil to Syrian ports, for example.[40] A tanker sanctioned for transporting Russian oil arrived at Baniyas Port on March 6.[41] Another oil tanker carrying Russian crude oil reportedly reached Baniyas Port on March 20, and at least one more shipment of Russian oil is expected to arrive at Baniyas Port in early April 2025.[42] Russia has not yet concluded a deal with the interim government to maintain its basing rights in Syria and will likely try to use these economic incentives as leverage to maintain a "reduced" military presence in Syria.[43]

Key Takeaways:

- **Threat to US Forces:** A senior official from Iranian-backed Iraqi militia Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba implicitly warned on March 20 that Iranian-backed Iraqi militias would resume attacks targeting US forces in Iraq and Syria if US forces do not withdraw from Iraq by the end of 2025. The United States and Iraq agreed in September 2024 that hundreds of US-led international coalition forces would withdraw from Iraq by September 2025 and that remaining forces would withdraw by the end of 2026. The Iraqi federal government has reportedly considered postponing the withdrawal of US forces in recent months due to the security threat it perceives that the fall of the Assad regime in Syria poses to Iraq, however.
- **Iraqi Militia-Houthi Cooperation:** Iranian-backed Iraqi militias and the Houthis are increasingly sharing military knowledge, which could increase both groups' ability to threaten US and allied interests in the region. The Royal United Services Institute reported on March 19 that Iranian-backed fighters in the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) have reportedly

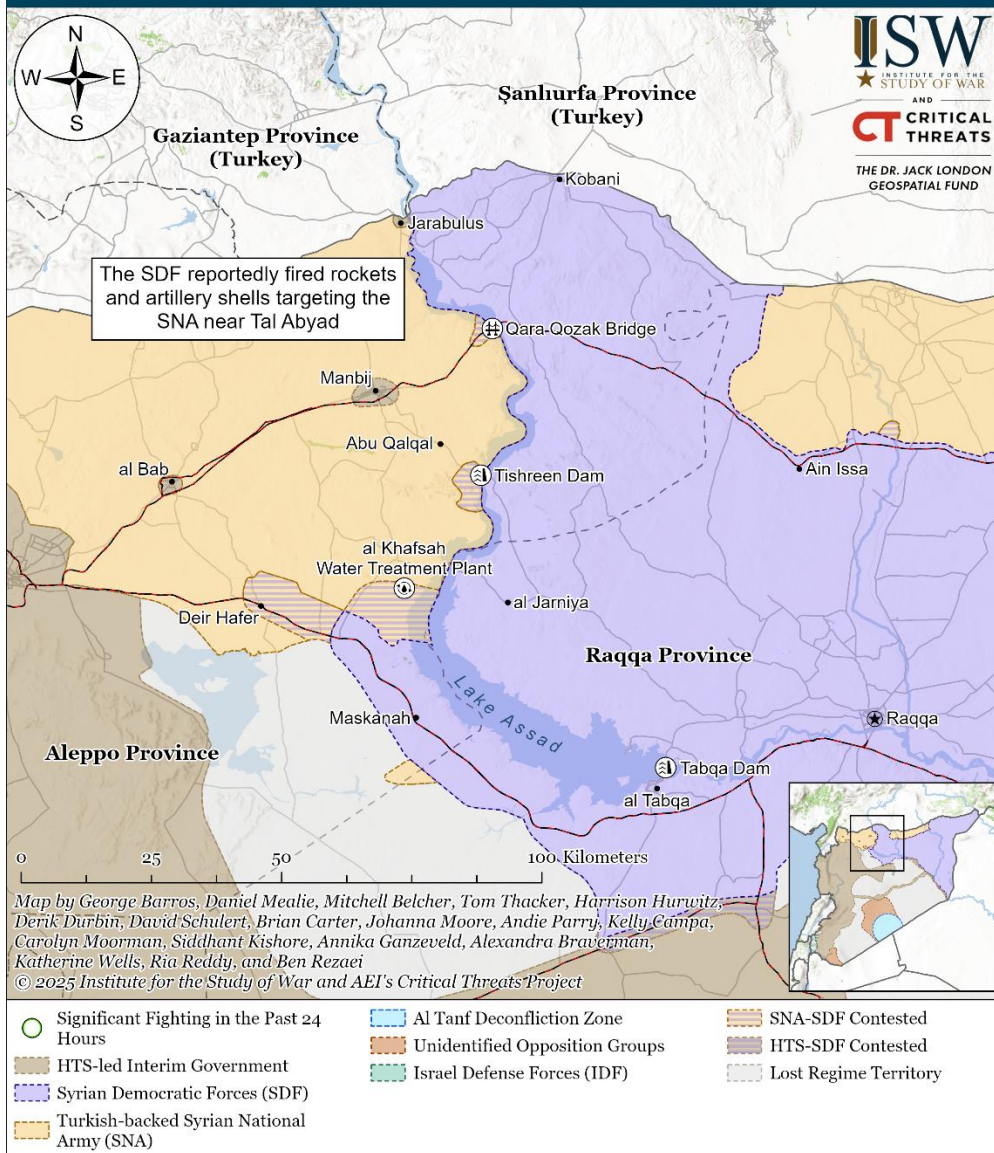
deployed to Yemen in recent months to train Houthi fighters in combat technology, including drones and improvised explosive devices.

- **SDF Integration into the Syrian State:** A Syrian journalist reported that the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) will withdraw from Deir ez Zor and Raqqa provinces and form an SDF-affiliated army division in Hasakah Province. It is unlikely that the SDF would agree to withdraw from Raqqa and Deir ez Zor provinces and integrate into the Syrian army while under active attack from Turkey and the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA). An “SDF-affiliated” division would be consistent with SDF Commander Mazloun Abdi’s demand that the SDF maintain some degree of autonomy by joining the Defense Ministry as a “military bloc,” however.
- **Syrian Insurgency:** Syrian government forces have conducted a series of raids and arrests targeting insurgent networks in Deir ez Zor Province, northeastern Syria, since CTP-ISW's last data cutoff on March 19. Insurgent cells in northeastern Syria may be driven by different underlying motivations than cells in western Syria. Anti-interim government attacks in northeastern Syria have occurred in towns along the primary smuggling route from Iraq into Syria on the southern bank of the Euphrates River.
- **Iranian Economy:** Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei highlighted Iran's economic weaknesses and problems in his Nowruz speech on March 20. Khamenei's recent rejection of nuclear negotiations with the United States, which would potentially provide Iran with sanctions relief, will likely contribute to worsening Iranian economic conditions. The Iranian regime will also likely not be able to meaningfully improve the Iranian economy if it does not address underlying issues, such as rampant corruption, nepotism, and mismanagement, that currently plague the economy.

Syria

The SDF reportedly fired rockets and artillery shells targeting the SNA in Tal Abyad, Raqqa Province.[44]

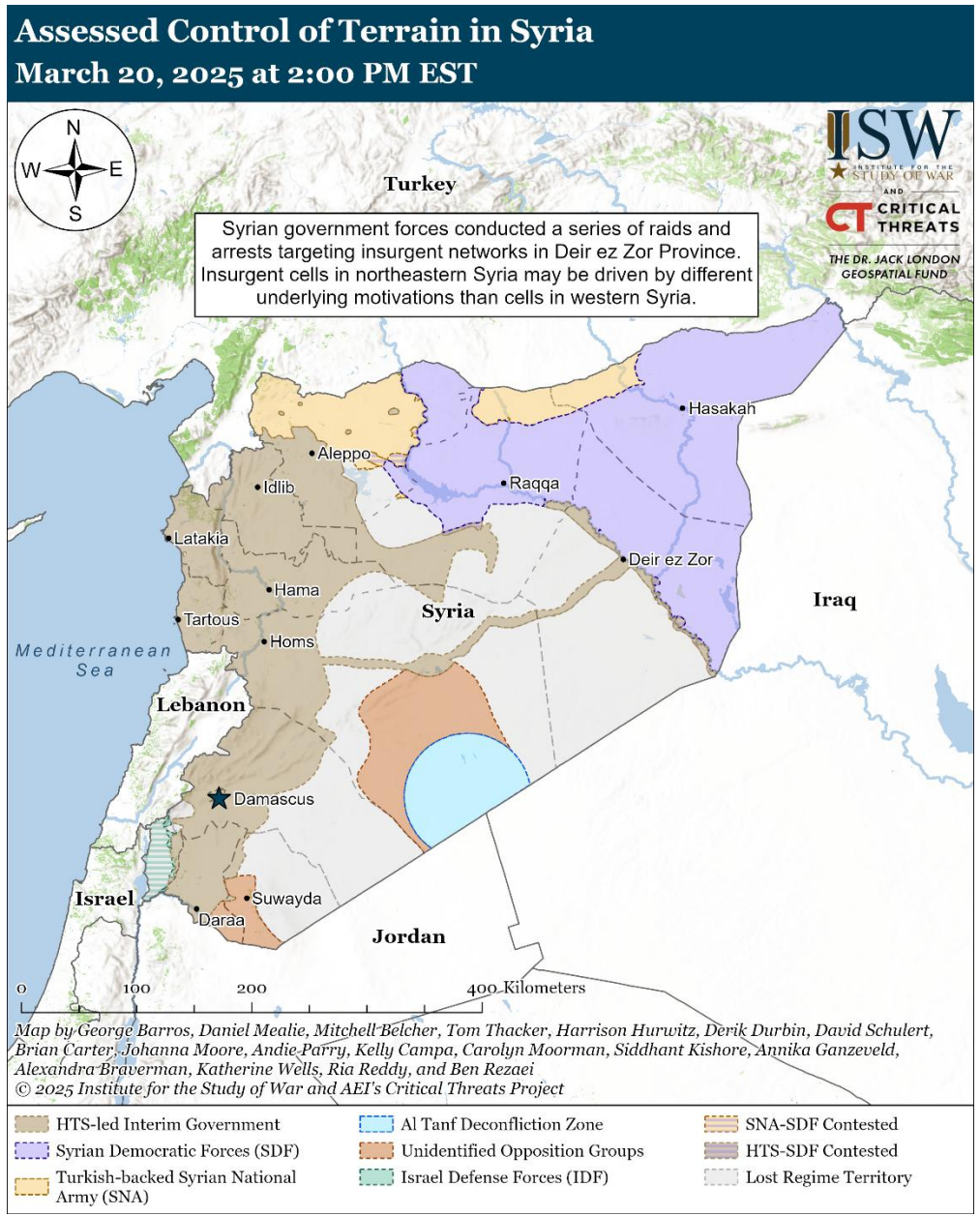
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Syrian General Security Forces seized a weapons depot in Kafr Abd, Homs Province, on March 20.[45] The weapons depot contained ammunition, missiles, and machine guns.[46] Security forces have seized three weapons depots in Kafr Abd since March 2.[47]

The Syrian interim government announced on March 20 that it plans to revoke Syrian citizenships that the Assad regime granted to “foreign fighters.”[48] The Syrian Civil Status Directorate said that it will revoke the citizenships of individuals who received Syrian citizenship in return for political or military support for the Assad regime.[49] The directorate stated that these individuals include foreign fighters who came to Syria to support the Assad regime during the civil war.[50]

Germany reopened its embassy in Syria on March 20 after 13 years.[51] German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock inaugurated the German Embassy in Damascus. Several European countries have restored diplomatic ties with Syria since the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024.[52]



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 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

CTP-ISW will not be covering the new Israeli operation in the Gaza Strip. We have reprioritized our Middle East coverage to focus on Iran's nuclear program, Iranian domestic security, and Iranian efforts to rebuild its networks into the Levant, including the Palestinian Territories. Given that Israel and its partners have destroyed Hamas' military organization and severed the group's ability to resupply itself, we are now focused on how Iran seeks to rebuild its lines of communication with Hezbollah and Hamas through Syria.

Iranian Decision-Making, Internal Dynamics, and Foreign Policy

See topline section.

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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- [48] <https://aawsat dot com/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A/5123972-%D9%85%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%B1->

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